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The Peninsula

Local focus, Global vision

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2 Riyals

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Amir Cup: Al Duhail crush Al Sailiya

Four patients recover from COVID-19: MoPH

FAZEENA SALEEM
THE PENINSULA

The health authorities have announced that four people have recovered from COVID-19 infection and tested free of the virus. The recovered people are from Jordan, Philippines, Sudan and Iran, officials said yesterday.

All the four with different background and travel history received treatment at the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC) and have been tested free of COVID-19, according to international standards, said officials speaking at a press conference held at the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH).

"The recovery of four people reaffirms the rapid measures taken by the health sector to screen and treat everyone equally. We hope to announce the recovery of many others soon," said Sheikh Dr. Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani, Director of the Public Health Department at the MoPH.

> **"We assure that medical supplies and treatment facilities are available in the country without any shortage. We urge the public to take precautions and not to panic," Director of the Public Health Department at the MoPH said.**

"We also assure that medical supplies and treatment facilities are available in the country without any shortage. We urge the public to take precautions and not to panic," he added.

Among the recovered patients, the Filipina returned from Iran on February 27, the Iranian is a resident of Qatar who had recently been home and returned, the Sudanese had close contact with a person who returned from Iran and the Jordanian had no travel history, according to Dr. Mona Al Muslimani, Medical Director at CDC.

"The Jordanian resident was suffering from a slight congestion in the pharynx and a slight rise in body temperature. Therefore the first sample of the patient was tested on March 7 and it was positive. But when the second sample was tested on March 10 and third sample on March 12 they were negative," she said.

"If the first sample is tested positive, the patient will be tested every four days. These periodical tests are performed as per required by the WHO standards for COVID-19," she added.

According to Dr. Al Muslimani, the Filipina resident returned from Iran with those who were evacuated on February 27 and diagnosed with COVID-19 during the prompt screening conducted by the MoPH.

"First sample from the patient was tested on March 4 and the second sample on March 7 and showed positive results. But on March 10 and March 13 the samples were tested negative meaning that she is now free from COVID-19," said Dr. Al Muslimani.

While, the Iranian returned from Iran on February 21 and was mild symptoms and was admitted to CDC on March 8. He was initially tested positive for COVID-19 but was tested negative on March 10 and 12.

The Sudanese who had contact with someone who had returned from Iran was admitted to CDC on March 8 and tested positive for COVID-19 on March 9. He showed symptoms like coughing but on March 12 and 13, his sample tests were negative and now he is in good health now, said Dr. Al Muslimani.

More than 6,700 people have been tested for COVID-19 in Qatar and yesterday 17 new cases of COVID-19 were reported.

"All patients, being treated for COVID-19, are being tested constantly and monitored well. They are in stable condition," said Dr. Al Muslimani.

The officials also said that the majority of those with COVID-19 infection are workers and extensive measures have been taken to stop the spread of the disease.



Nayef Abboud Al Shammari, Assistant Executive Director of Media at Hamad Medical Corporation; Sheikh Dr. Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani, Director of the Public Health Department at the MoPH, and Dr. Mona Al Muslimani, Medical Director at CDC, during a press conference yesterday. PIC: ABDUL BASIT/THE PENINSULA

MoPH announces changes in routine healthcare services

THE PENINSULA— DOHA

In a bid to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect patients and public, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) yesterday announced a number of changes in provision of routine healthcare services.

"As a result of the rapidly evolving situation relating to coronavirus disease (COVID-19), a number of changes have been made that affect the provision of routine healthcare services in Qatar's healthcare system. These changes have been made in order to prioritise resources at this important time and to protect patients, visitors and the wider public from the spread of COVID-19," said MoPH in its website.

It said that PHCC is implementing precautionary measures that will come into effect from today. All scheduled appointments are now cancelled except Well-baby and Vaccination Clinics and Urgent Radiology and Ultrasound appointments.

All Walk-in and urgent units will be operating as normal and all Urgent Care Units will also be operating as normal

PHCC's six Urgent Care Centers – at Gharrafat Al Rayyan, Rawdat Al Khail, Al Gharafa, Al Kaaban, Al Shahaniyah, and Al Shamal Health Centers – will remain open as usual 24 hours a day seven days a week for walk-in patients requiring urgent care

About changes to outpatient services at Hamad Medical Corporation it said that all patients with scheduled outpatient appointments will continue to receive a consultation by one of our doctors.

However, all outpatient appointments will be delivered via telephone consultations. Therefore, patients should not come to the hospital. If during the telephone consultation the doctor deems that the patient needs to come in to see them, the doctor will arrange for a new appointment within days.

For any enquiries relating to changes in outpatient services, call HMC's Nesmaak customer care team on 16060.

All elective surgeries, day surgeries, elective procedures like endoscopy and dental have been cancelled. It added that cancelled surgeries will be rescheduled for a later date.

Regarding the inpatient visitor policy, MoPH said that in order to limit the potential spread of COVID-19, additional restrictions for visitors to Inpatient Units are now in place across HMC hospitals.

All HMC Emergency Departments (including Pediatric Care Centers) continue to operate as normal, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "Patients are reminded that HMC's Emergency Departments are for urgent and life-threatening conditions only. Patients with urgent, but non-life threatening, conditions can visit these PHCC's Urgent Care Clinics 24 hours a day seven days a week," said MoPH.

Patients with suspected COVID-19 should call the MOPH hotline on 16000, it added.

HMC's Ambulance Service continues to operate as normal, providing 24/7 medical services to patients with medical emergencies requiring immediate attention and transfer to an emergency department.

The public are reminded not to call 999 for enquiries in relation to COVID-19. For all questions and enquiries related to COVID-19, members of the public should call the Ministry of Public Health's dedicated hotline on 16000.

Qatar takes part in Gulf Health Ministers meeting

QNA — DOHA

The State of Qatar took part in the meeting of Health Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which was held yesterday through video conference to discuss the developments of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Minister of Public Health H E Dr. Hanan Mohammed Al Kuwari represented Qatar in the meeting.

The meeting reviewed the latest developments in the GCC countries, and discussed measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

An overview of the current situation in each of the GCC states was presented, including the procedures followed in the ports, statistics related to the virus, health sector readiness, media and awareness plans, and contingency plans.

Employees of government and semi-government sectors not subject to the Labour Law covered by exit permit abolition

Employees of the private offices
Employees of marine vessels in the waters of the State of Qatar
Employees of the ministries and public bodies, institutions and other government agencies
Employees of agriculture and irrigation sector
Employees of the oil and gas sector and its subsidiaries

Excluded from this

5%

Of employees in all sectors (specified by the employer)

They must submit an application with their employers to obtain a final or temporary exit permit.

www.moi.gov.qa

Exit permits set to be cancelled on March 19, says Ministry of Interior

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) announced yesterday that the exit permit for government and semi-government sectors that are not subject to the Labour Law will be abolished, with effect from March 19, 2020, exempting a category — 5 percent of the employees — in the establishment are determined by the employer in the relevant sectors.

Major Abdullah Khalifa Al Muhannadi, Director of the Visa Support Services Department at the General Directorate of Passport, said that, according to this decision, temporary or final exit during the period of valid work contract is permissible without exit permit for the employees in the ministries and other government agencies, public bodies and institutions, workers. In the oil and gas sector and its subsidiaries, employees of sea and in territorial waters, workers in agriculture and irrigation, and those working in private offices as well.

He explained that a category — five percent of workers in the establishment — will be excluded as they must submit an application with their employer for obtaining a final or temporary exit permit.

He pointed out that HR departments have been informed in the relevant sectors to inform them of the required procedures and steps.

Al Muhannadi added that these procedures were activated through Metrash2 and the website of the Ministry of Interior since March 5 to enable the authorities in the relevant sectors to add the employees included in the excluded category before the implementation of the decision begins.

A text message will be sent to those who are included in the category informing the necessity of submitting an application with the employer in case of wishing to leave the country temporarily or permanently.

SJC suspends court sessions for two weeks

QNA — DOHA

The Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) yesterday announced the suspension of the sessions of the Court of Appeal, the Court of First Instance, Labour Disputes Settlement Committee and Rental Disputes Settlements Committee as of today, for two weeks.

In a press release, the Council confirmed judges continue to look in time-related and other urgent matters, in addition to setting new dates for postponed sessions. The Court of Cassation will continue to consider its hearings on the pre-scheduled dates.

This action comes within the framework of the preventive efforts and measures taken by the State of Qatar to curb the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), for everyone's safety, and after coordination with the relevant authorities in the country.

Temporary travel restrictions from designated countries

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Government Communications Office (GCO) of the State of Qatar has announced that it has been decided to suspend visa on arrival from a number of European countries, effective from today until further notice.

The decision comes as part of the precautionary measures taken by the State of Qatar to limit the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), and as an extension to previous decisions on suspending travel from designated countries, the GCO said in a statement yesterday.

The GCO said on its website that the decision includes suspending entry for citizens of Italy, France, Germany and Spain, as well as all others travelling from these countries.

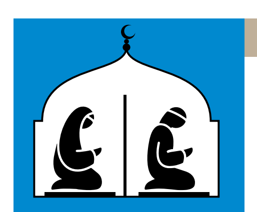
Individuals intending to travel from these four countries who are in possession of a Qatar residence permit are excluded from this decision, provided that they stay in a quarantine facility for 14 days as per the local procedures.

It has also been decided to temporarily suspend entry to the State of Qatar from the Republic of Sudan.

This restriction includes those who are in possession of visa on arrival or a Qatar residence permit, the GCO said.

The State of Qatar continues to urge citizens and residents to avoid all but essential travel at this time.

These precautionary measures may be subject to further updates based on the latest guidance of the national health authorities and international organisations regarding the spread of COVID-19, in order to ensure the safety of all residents of the State of Qatar.



PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR	04.27 am	SUNRISE	05.43 am
ZUHR	11.43 am	ASR	03.08 pm
MAGHRIB	05.45 pm	ISHA	07.15 pm

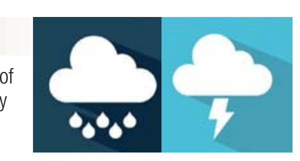


WEATHER TODAY

19°C Minimum | 29°C Maximum

Moderate temperature daytime, partly cloudy with chance of scattered rain by evening and slight dust at times, relatively cold by night.

HIGH TIDE 06:06 - 18:27 LOW TIDE 01:01 - 13:47



ALRUWAIS: 18°-28° ALKHOR: 16°-26° DUKHAN: 17°-30° WAKRAH: 17°-27° MESAIEED 17°-27° ABUSAMRA 14°-32°

Students to get full marks in three remaining subjects: Fawzia Al Khater

THE PENINSULA — DOHA



The Assistant Under-Secretary for Educational Affairs at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Fawzia Al Khater **(pictured)**, has said that school students will be given full marks in three subjects whose exams were not conducted due to suspension of classes.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, the government suspended classes in public and private schools and universities for all students from March 10, 2020, until further notice. "The students will not undergo supplementary exams for the remaining subjects when they return to school after the vacation of the middle of the second semester," said Fawzia Al Khater while talking to a Qatar TV programme.

She assured students that the Ministry is keen to safeguard their interest and all decision will be issued in their favour. "If students could not return to school after vacation, we have developed many plans to face the challenges," said Al Khater. She said that the Ministry in cooperation with other ministries has made plans to face all possible challenges, in case of the suspension of classes the education process will continue with the help virtual education and home education. "The Ministry is ready because necessary infrastructure is available. Since 2011, we have started electronic education which is operational in the schools and it was used by all students, teachers and parents in the previous so they are familiar," said Al Khater.

She stressed that it is important for the students to continue the educational process and obtain all the basic knowledge that will enable them to complete their next academic year easily.

Qatar's commitment to Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions praised

QNA — DOHA

The convention promotes open exchange of information and calls on exporters of hazardous chemicals to use proper labeling, including directions on safe handling, and inform purchasers of any known restrictions or bans.

The Secretariat of the "Rotterdam and Stockholm" conventions of the United Nations Environment Program congratulated, on its official website and its Twitter account, the State of Qatar on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of becoming an international actor and committed to the terms of these two multilateral environmental conventions that the Qatar signed on December 10, 2004.

The Rotterdam Convention the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade' is a multilateral treaty to promote shared responsibilities in relation to importation of hazardous chemicals.

The convention promotes open exchange of information and calls on exporters of hazardous chemicals to use proper labeling, including directions on safe handling, and inform purchasers of any known restrictions or bans. Signatory nations can decide whether to allow or ban the importation of chemicals listed in the treaty, and exporting countries are obliged to make sure that producers within their jurisdiction comply.

Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants is an international environmental treaty, signed in 2001 and effective from May 2004, that aims to eliminate or restrict the production and use of persistent organic pollutants (POPs). The Ministry of Municipality and Environment represents the State of Qatar in the periodic meetings and conferences related to these two conventions through the Department of Radiation and Chemical Protection, and the national point of contact in the Ministry is the link between the State and the Convention secretariat.

Qatar participated in the Conference of the Parties to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal and the Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, held in Geneva last year.

Qatar continues to flourish despite blockade

ANATOLIA — ANKARA

Doha continues to flourish and overcome economic difficulties despite a blockade that has been under way for more than 1,000 days.

"At the end of February 2020, the unfair besiege completed 1,000 days, it was an era of failure, confusion, and moral downfall for the countries of the blockade," Qatar's Ambassador to Turkey, H E Salem bin Mubarak Al Shafi **(pictured)**, told *Anadolu Agency*. "But for Qatar, it was 1,000 days of pride and steadfastness."

Stressing that Qatar would not compromise its sovereignty, H E the Ambassador reiterated that Doha would always "adopt dialogue and peaceful solutions."

"The countries of the blockade aimed to isolate Qatar internationally, by flooding the international community with a stream of allegations and lies," he said. "But the facts are always victorious and cannot be withheld, so all these efforts failed."

Following the announcement of the blockade, the Qatari economy managed to successfully navigate the move, H E Al Shafi said, adding: "And we don't forget the historic stand of Turkey to our side when it immediately established an air bridge that broke the economic besiege in the first hours."

He noted Turkey also established a Turkish-Qatari maritime line from western Izmir port to Hamad port to maintain the constant flow of goods.

"Turkey's standing at our side was the greatest evidence of the distinguished brotherly relationship that binds us to it, especially since it is biased towards the right, and it is the one that has never failed to do everything that contributes to the security, unity and stability of the region," he said.

Citing brotherly relations, H E Al Shafi also said Turkey

"At the end of February 2020, the unfair besiege completed 1,000 days, it was an era of failure, confusion, and moral downfall for the countries of the blockade," Qatar's Ambassador to Turkey, H E Salem bin Mubarak Al Shafi, told Anadolu Agency. "But for Qatar, it was 1,000 days of pride and steadfastness."

has "never refrained to do everything that contributes to security, unity and stability of the region."

"We understand the Turkey's moves it has taken to protect its national security and ensure decent living conditions for the immigrants who took shelter in its lands," he said.

He pointed out that Qatar is aware of the humanitarian positions of Turkey and its moral approach "made it almost alone in front of other blocs."

"But history does not forget and records everything either those who wanted to rebuild homelands or those who wreak havoc on earth," H E the Ambassador said.

H E Al Shafi emphasised his country has undertaken projects to ensure its self-sufficiency in sectors such as food and medicine by diversifying investments with regional and international collaborations.

He pointed out that Qatar's mediation efforts for a peace agreement between the US and Afghanistan's Taliban after 20 years of war, is the most obvious example of success despite efforts employed by blockade countries to obstruct it.

H E the Ambassador stressed that Qatar continued to flourish politically, economically, scientifically and in sports, and have become a hub for art, culture, sports and science, and hosted dozens of intellectual activities, sports championships, conferences and political events.

Qatar "continued to implement huge projects related to organising 2022 FIFA World Cup," he said.

Despite the blockade, H E the Ambassador said Qatar did not hesitate to support those in need citing its aid campaign for displaced people in northern Syria who suffer in difficult humanitarian conditions.

"We respect the sovereignty of states within their territories, and we wish to achieve stability and security in the region," H E the Ambassador said. "But this can only be done through the collaboration of all efforts, sincere cooperation, and respect for the sovereignty of the state of Qatar."

Diabetics urged to take extra precautions against COVID-19

THE PENINSULA — DOHA



Professor Abdul Badi Abou Samra **(pictured)**, Director of the Qatar Metabolic Institute, and Chairman of Internal Medicine at Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC), has urged diabetics in the country not to be panic that it is important to take extra precautions to guard against COVID-19.

"People with chronic diseases, particularly diabetes, have lower immunity levels than healthy people. Therefore, it is important that they take extra precautions by practicing good personal hygiene and not sharing food, glasses, and towels, and avoiding contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illnesses. They should also seek medical care in case they feel sick," said Professor Abou Samra.

"Like other respiratory illnesses, COVID-19 spreads from one person to another through air droplets that are dispersed when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. The virus can also be spread through close contact with an infected person or by touching surfaces contaminated with air droplets and then touching the mouth or nose. Therefore, hand hygiene and social distancing are essential for protection from COVID-19," said Professor Abou Samra.

In addition to taking precautions such as thorough hand washing and avoiding contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness, Professor Abou Samra says it is important that people with diabetes follow the guidance provided by their healthcare team for how to manage sick days.

"It is important to make a list of your medications and their dosages. If you have type 1 diabetes, ensure you have a good supply of glucagon and ketone strips. It is also important to ensure you have enough insulin and medication for a couple of weeks, should you be too ill to get prescriptions refilled. If you are at risk for hypoglycemia, check your blood sugar as soon as you feel any symptoms and if your blood sugar is low, drink a cup of juice or have three pieces of sugar," said Professor Abou Samra.

Professor Abou Samra says patients should never hesitate to contact their doctor if they have questions about managing their diabetes, especially if they feel unwell. He says it is important to immediately contact your doctor if your blood sugar is over 300 mg/dl for two tests in a row (in a two-to-eight hour period), if you find ketones in your urine, feel sleepier than usual, have trouble breathing, can't think clearly, have diarrhea, have an infection, vision, speech, or balance problems.

"Most diabetics will be very familiar with how to care for themselves during sick days, but if they have any questions they should consult their healthcare team. It is especially important that they talk to their doctor about any changes to their diabetes medications when sick, and also what medications they can take for colds, flu, viruses, and infections," said Professor Abou Samra.

Ministry to renew social security card automatically

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs has said that in the context of the precautionary measures taken by the state to limit the spread of the coronavirus, it has been decided to extend the validity of social security cards of citizens until further notice.

"Accordingly, the Ministry will implement the procedures for renewing social security cards automatically without the need for the beneficiary to visit the department concerned for renewal," the Ministry tweeted yesterday evening.

Katara suspends all activities

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

To reduce the chance of infection and transmission of coronavirus, Katara has announced that it will suspend all activities for a period of two weeks. The health club, beach area and eateries will be closed in addition to art galleries from today.

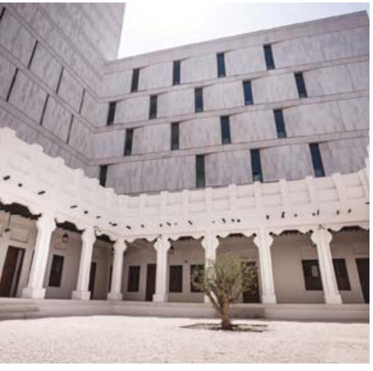
Katara said on Twitter: "In line with the efforts made by Qatar to reduce infection of coronavirus (COVID-19), Katara will suspend all its activities, events, art galleries, restaurants and cafes in addition to the health club and Katara Beach area for a period of two weeks, starting from Sunday, March 15, 2020." Katara has exempted all investors and owners of restaurants and cafes from rent and other fees like electricity and water. This step comes as Katara suspended all activities from tomorrow for two weeks to reduce the spread of coronavirus.

The latest announcement of rent exemption was made by Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti, General Manager of Katara, on statement posted on Twitter. He said that exemption from rent and other fees will start from today, (March 15, 2020) until further notice.

Katara has also instructed its staff to work from home for two weeks to reduce the spread of coronavirus.

Msheireb Museums closes facilities to support authorities to contain virus

THE PENINSULA — DOHA



Msheireb Museums, the four heritage houses and the cultural destination at Msheireb Downtown Doha, has announced the temporary closure of its facilities in Msheireb Downtown Doha until further notice.

This action is being taken by Msheireb Properties to support the precautionary measures put in place by the State of Qatar to prevent and contain the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), said a statement.

Msheireb Properties, the developer of the flagship project Msheireb Downtown Doha, has also applauded the effort taken by Qatari authorities to tackle the coronavirus spread and wishes the citizens and residents of Qatar wellbeing and health. Msheireb Properties has halted Tram service at Msheireb Downtown Doha until further notice for the same reason. The closure of Msheireb Museums and MDD tram is part of the response Msheireb Properties is taking at its flagship project Msheireb Downtown Doha to help secure the health of local community and support the effort of Qatari authorities.

MoCI suspends auctions at Umm Salal Fish Market

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) in coordination with the Ministry of Municipality and Environment, has announced to suspend the auctions at Umm Salal Fish Market from today until further notice as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

The Ministry announced it on its Twitter account yesterday. MoCI has also temporarily suspended the activities of street vendors. "The Ministry notifies street vendors of its decision to halt sales, as well as the provision of all services, in a bid to ensure public safety in light of the current health circumstances across the country," the Ministry tweeted yesterday. The Ministry asked people to avoid visiting in person to customer service centres and government service complexes and use electronic services of the Ministry for the transactions.



We extend

our sincere condolences and great sympathy to

Sheikh Hamad bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

Sheikh Salman bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

Sheikh Hassan bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

Sheikh Mohammed bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

on the sad demise of their

father

Sheikh Khaled bin Hassan bin Abdullah Al Thani

We pray to Almighty Allah
to grant Jannat to the departed soul
and patience for the bereaved family



LuLu لولو

MME launches campaign to preserve coral reefs along Sealine Beach

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Ministry of Municipality and Environment (MME) represented by Natural Reserve Department has launched a campaign to clean coral reefs along Sealine Beach, located at southeastern coast of the country.

Under the slogan 'Together We Care About Our Coral Reefs', the campaign was held in cooperation with a number of agencies and institutions in the country, headed by the Internal Security Force (Lekhwiya), the Al Ghais Center for Diving and the ReefTech for the Production of Industrial Coral Reefs and some volunteer divers, said the Ministry in a press release.

On this occasion, Mohamed Yousef Al Jaida, an expert and environmental adviser at the Ministry of Municipality and Environment and the general supervisor of the campaign, said that first campaign to clean coral reefs at Sealine Beach was launched in 2009, where 101 industrial coral reefs were placed at Sealine Beach and 440 coral reefs in the sea.

An expert pointed out that cleaning the coral reefs from these pests will provide an opportunity for the rapid growth of these coral reefs by 70%, as a number of natural coral will be cultivated after the process of cleaning the existing coral reefs.

He pointed out that through its follow-up during the past years, the growth of a number of water weeds were observed, which is a pest that may harm coral reefs by the time and affect coral growth, so this campaign was organised in cooperation with a number of agencies in the country to move and arrange coral reefs and clean them from weeds.

He pointed out that cleaning the coral reefs from these pests will provide an opportunity for the rapid growth of these coral reefs by 70%, as a number of natural coral will be cultivated after the process of cleaning the existing coral reefs.

He added that the ministry is making great efforts to preserve coral reefs as part of its plan to preserve the seabed of the territorial waters of the State of Qatar from pollutants that lead to the deterioration of marine life, such as coral reefs that are affected by human pressures and other pollutants.

He stressed on the need to preserve coral reefs as one of the integrated environmental systems that are of great economic and tourist importance.



Divers cleaning the coral reefs at Sealine Beach as part of a campaign which was launched by the Ministry of Municipality and Environment.

He explained that the team that carried out the work has about 50 divers involved in the cleaning campaign from the various participating agencies.

In the same context, Captain Dhafer Nasser Al Hajri, Commander of the Naval Intervention Company in the Special Unit of the Lekhwiya, said that the Lekhwiya Force participated to provide necessary support to the Ministry of Municipality and Environment in cleaning the coral reefs. He confirmed that the participating teams of Lekhwiya strength are equipped with qualified, trained and highly qualified teams in carrying out diving and rapid intervention operations.

First Lieutenant Fahd Sultan Al Hajri, a diving officer at the Qatar International Search and Rescue Group said that the Lekhwiya force participated in 20 divers to provide support and assistance in the campaign, in addition to a marine rescue team and a medical team to ensure the safety of all and maintenance technicians to provide the necessary support to the divers involved in the campaign.

Mahmoud Al Mallah, Director of Al Ghais Center for Diving said that their participation in the cleaning campaign comes within the framework of caring and coral reefs, which is an important point to attract tourism in Qatar. He pointed out that the center participated in providing the necessary support during the campaign by providing diving tools for divers participating in the coral clean-up campaign.

'Made in Qatar' products meet rising demands in market

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The global supply chain is experiencing a total disruption as the COVID 19 continues to spread to more than 90 countries. How well countries cope with the economic consequences will be determined by the strategies that are already in place to mitigate supply chain risks, said Professor Alexis Antoniades (**pictured**), Associate Professor and Director of International Economics at Georgetown University in Qatar.

"Countries that rely heavily on raw material from China will be affected the most, while countries that have diversified sources will not suffer as much. But supply chain disruptions are not the only concerns for countries. Countries that have weak healthcare infrastructure, rely heavily on tourism, and our not financially able to undertake significant fiscal stimulus will be hit hard," Professor Antoniades said.

With Qatar becoming increasingly self-reliant in response to the blockade, it now manufactures many products that it previously didn't. And as panic buying takes over, with shelf after shelf of disinfectant and hand sanitiser emptied by residents concerned about the threat of infection, local production will serve to calm many of the fears.

"In more ways than one,



the blockade has been a blessing in disguise," said Dr Antoniades, a professor at the QF partner university, and a twelve-year veteran of the Qatar economy. "In less than three years since the launch of the Gulf Crisis, the nation's manufacturing sector has boomed. Last week we were out of hand sanitizer, but now shops are fully stocked with locally produced bottles. That's the impact of 'made in Qatar'."

Given the current COVID 2019 outlook, public trust in governments and institutions in handling major crises will serve as a major driver of public perceptions and reactions. Broad government reassurances will need the backing of concrete measures and a foundation of trust to guide the country through the unfolding crisis.

"I think Qatar has done an excellent job in dealing with COVID 2019. First, they are inspiring confidence through reassuring messages and actions. They are transparent, decisive in their actions, clear, and quick to act.

"This was also the strategy when the blockade hit the country. Qatar made the best out of it, shielding the nation from the effects of the blockade, in the short term, while putting into place a strategy for protective long-term measures. For most people, life felt normal. So today, when the State says: Don't worry, we're on top of it; the public can believe it. That confidence is key in helping prevent panic and dealing with the developments."

In particular, Professor Antoniades notes that Qatar's move to evacuate residents and citizens from Iran using private charter planes was a strategic decision. "The State was very smart. They sent private planes to evacuate people in a controlled exercise that minimized the spread of the virus in an uncontrolled fashion. That was a very successful effort."

And while Qatar takes part in the global effort to contain the virus, it also shares in the global economic toll of the slowing economy, which continues to head into a recession. With an economic dependency on hydrocarbons – it receives a large part of revenue by selling Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) – Qatar is also impacted by the drop in the LNG market, according to Professor Antoniades.

Energy Conservation Program launched at MES Indian School

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

'Energy Conservation Program', an initiative launched by Tarsheed of Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation (Kahramaa) in association with the Institution of Engineers India, Qatar chapter, has been launched at MES Indian School recently.

Abdul Sathar, Chairman of Institution of the Engineers of India (IEI), termed it a vital activity for the students. Hameeda Kadar, Principal of the school was the chief guest of the function. Baseeth Ahmed, Director, Conserve Engineering, explained the importance of sustainable development. Sabeena and Meenu Chauhan, President and Secretary of IEI Women's wing respectively, felicitated the initiatives taken by the association. Hameeda Kadar was honoured.



The felicitation ceremony as part of the launch of the 'Energy Conservation Program' at MES Indian School recently.



The Chairman of Qatar Red Crescent, Dr. Mohammed bin Ghanem Elali Al Maadheed, and Secretary-General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Jagan Chapagain, during the meeting in Qatar.

Qatar Red Crescent discusses importance of humanitarian work in areas of conflict

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Chairman of Qatar Red Crescent, Dr. Mohammed bin Ghanem Elali Al Maadheed, has received in his office Secretary-General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Jagan Chapagain.

They discussed the cooperation ways and to develop a mechanism of action regarding the work in the humanitarian field around the world during the meeting.

The two parties highlighted the importance of the humanitarian work in the areas of conflict and disasters, especially nowadays as the world is suffering from the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) 2019.

Dr. Mohammed bin Ghanem Elali Al Maadheed pointed out that Qatar Red Crescent, since its foundation in 1978 and in all its stage and its subsequent development, has a noble mission and takes it upon itself to serve humanity, advocate for the weak and to safeguard their dignity, inspired by the ideals and the noble values of the authentic Qatari spirit.

He said that as a continuation of its accomplishments, that span for more than 41 years, Qatar Red Crescent still presents through its projects, programs and its humanitarian and medical workers spreading in all regions effected by conflict and disasters, to give a hand to the effected and to fill their basic needs such as food, shelter, medicine and drinking water, with giving priority to the most vulnerable like widows, orphans, elderly, patients and people with special needs.

Ali bin Hassan Al Hammadi urged, while receiving Magan Chapagain, to continue the fruitful cooperation between the two parties in enhancing the joint efforts during disasters and the logistical support in all humanitarian fields.

Jagan Chapagain said, "The purpose of my visit to Qatar is to conduct consultations and to discuss the means of cooperation between Qatar Red Crescent and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as it is a voluntary humanitarian organization including youth and adults, and the majority are youth. What we do is making coordination between the 192 societies according to specific criteria."

"I consider Qatar Red Crescent as one of the most efficient of the national societies that we have in the Middle East and North Africa, and we have a great coordination with it, especially during the big disasters and crises that occur in several countries around the world," said Chapagain

He said that Qatar Red Crescent plays an important role in this side regionally, thanks to its leadership represented by His Excellency Dr. Mohammed bin Ghanem Elali Al Maadheed, the Chairman of Qatar Red Crescent.

"This quick visit to Qatar resulted in several negotiations about the joint cooperation with Qatar government in reflecting many international policies, which facilitate the humanity work," said Jagan Chapagain.



We extend

our sincere condolences and great sympathy to

Sheikh Hamad bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

Sheikh Salman bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

Sheikh Hassan bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

Sheikh Mohammed bin Khaled Hassan Abdullah Al Thani

on the sad demise of their

father

Sheikh Khaled bin Hassan bin Abdullah Al Thani

We pray to Almighty Allah
to grant Jannat to the departed soul
and patience for the bereaved family

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ



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Coronavirus can be tackled through collective action, responsibility: Expert

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Using face masks may not necessarily offer full protection against coronavirus and is not recommended for people with no symptoms of a flu like-illness, according to Dr. Laith Abu Raddad, Professor of Healthcare Policy and Research at Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar, a Qatar Foundation partner university.

"Of particular concern is the mishandling of face masks and the resulting frequent face touching which could increase the risk for an uninfected person to contract the virus," he said.

"The use of masks is therefore not recommended unless the person is showing flu-like symptoms such as coughing and sneezing.

"It is reassuring that despite thousands of tests on people with flu-like or respiratory illnesses in Qatar, very few turned out to be infected with the coronavirus. The rapid governmental response in finding cases, isolating them, identifying their contacts, and testing them, and the precautionary measures undertaken – even if they led to disturbances to daily routine – are all to ensure containment of the virus, a strategy that has been working in Qatar where the outbreak remains under control."

Dr. Abu Raddad emphasised that containing this virus is a collective responsibility of people and governments. "We will not be able to control the coronavirus spread unless every person becomes engaged and follows the prevention recommendations," he said.



Dr. Laith Abu Raddad emphasised that containing this virus is a collective responsibility of people and governments. "We will not be able to control the coronavirus spread unless every person becomes engaged and follows the prevention recommendations," he said.

"This is an unusual epidemic that requires every person to act with responsibility and cooperate with the other people and the public health authorities."

According to Dr. Abu Raddad, there is "a lot of misinformation" surrounding coronavirus, which is "feeding a culture of fear, if not panic", he added.

"Fear usually occurs when people do not understand what is happening, or in this case do not really know what this virus is all about," he said.

"However, we know what the coronavirus is, how it is transmitted, and what the level of risk is in Qatar. So there is no need to panic as transmission between members of the community remains limited.

"It is also the flu season, and there are other cold viruses circulating, which can cause symptoms similar to those caused by the coronavirus. With this in mind, if anyone does show symptoms, it is unlikely that they are infected with the coronavirus, but rather with other common cold viruses."

He also emphasised that people should only refer to credible news sources and official social media accounts for reliable information, said, "The statistics and numbers related to the coronavirus in Qatar are being constantly updated and made available to the public as they occur, and this should be reassuring for everyone."

Dr. Abu Raddad said that the danger posed by the coronavirus lies in it being more infectious than a typical cold virus, and that it can lead to serious disease in some people. For example, for seasonal influenza, each infected person will on average infect 1.3 other persons, while each person infected with the new coronavirus will on average infect 2.2 other persons.

However, around 80 percent of those who contract the coronavirus will only suffer from a mild infection similar to a usual cold infection, 14 percent will show severe symptoms and may require hospitalisation, and only six percent will develop critical, life-threatening symptoms. Currently, the death rate from coronavirus, using data obtained from China, is about 2-4 per cent.

"It is more dangerous than the usual seasonal flu, which causes death in only 0.1 percent of cases," said Dr Abu Raddad. "However, most deaths are occurring among the elderly population and persons already suffering from health complications."

While the level of risk in Qatar remains on the low side, and the government is making every effort to rapidly contain the infection, the need remains for people need to act responsibly. And Dr. Abu Raddad said that, rather than using masks, there are better ways of avoiding the infection.

"Social distancing – that is, avoiding close contact with others by keeping a one-meter distance, avoiding large gatherings and crowded places – and regular hand and face washing, are measures proven to be far more effective in reducing the risk of acquiring the virus than face masks," he said, adding that people showing flu-like symptoms should isolate themselves immediately and seek healthcare assistance by contacting the toll-free national hotline at 16000.



Dr. Laith Abu Raddad, Professor of Healthcare Policy and Research at Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar, a Qatar Foundation partner university.

IIQS-Qatar conducts its third CPD event

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Indian Institute of Quantity Surveyors - Qatar Chapter (IIQS-Qatar) (Associated to Indian Business and Professionals Council (IBPC) under the aegis of Embassy of India in Qatar) successfully conducted its third Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of 2020 at Concorde Hotel on March 4.

John Coghlan, Principal, C&E LegalSolutions, delivered an entertaining and interactive lecture on the topic 'Learn how Qatar Law impacts your Construction & Engineering Contract' among 35+ members and guests.

The speaker included many Qatari Civil Code (Law No. 22 of 2004) Clauses having impact in the construction and Engineering Contract. The attendees found the presentation beneficial and enlightening.

Neshat Qureshi (IIQS-Qatar APC Committee member) welcomed the attendees and presided over the event. Kiran Kumar (IIQS-Qatar General Secretary) & Anshul Gupta (IIQS-Qatar Past President) felicitated John Coghlan for his knowledge sharing. Sudheer Edamana (IIQS-Qatar Vice President) expressed vote of thanks.



IIQS-Qatar members at the third Continuing Professional Development (CPD) 2020 event at Concorde Hotel.

QNTC holds workshop with hospitality sector on preventing spread of COVID-19

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

QNTC held an awareness workshop in cooperation with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) on measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in hospitality establishments throughout Qatar. The workshop was attended by senior representatives from across the hospitality sector.

The session was led by Dr. Salam Sharrab from MoPH who explained the core measures hospitality employees should take to protect themselves and their guests, the most important of which is washing hands thoroughly with any type of soap.

He also stated that any staff member or guest exhibiting symptoms of the virus should be quarantined as a precautionary measure, and that MoPH can be reached any time by calling 16000.

The workshop addressed the importance of using alcohol-based antiseptics with 70 percent concentration to clean toilets, surfaces and public places like gyms, restaurants, lobbies and guest rooms.

Several of the hotel managers that took part in the workshop stated that they have already taken a number of precautionary steps such as asking staff to limit their interactions outside the workplace, checking employees for fever on a daily basis before they enter the hotel, using sanitisers in accordance with MoPH standards, and sterilizing all tables, chairs and gym equipment after every use.

Some hotels are offering their guests sanitiser upon arrival, and taking additional steps to ensure to the cleanliness of facilities like spas or pools.

QNTC has launched a task force that has been assigned to work around the clock in coordination with the MoPH and other concerned entities to make sure that a steady flow of information and directives is communicated to all hospitality establishments and attractions in Qatar.



An expert speaking at the Awareness workshop on preventing spread of coronavirus.

DPS-Modern Indian School bags ECO-Schools Programme Award



DPS-Modern Indian School students holding certificates during the ECO-Schools Programme Award 2019-20 ceremony.

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

DPS-Modern Indian School has been awarded with the prestigious ECO-Schools Programme Award 2019-20 for the third consecutive year at a ceremony held on March 7, 2020.

The institution bagged the Red Star in the 'Waste Management' category for its project on 'DPS-MIS Waste Management'.

'ECO-Schools Programme Award', a nationwide initiative by Doha Bank encourages schools to reduce their carbon footprints and empower the young minds to make a difference to the society and the environment.

Dr. R Seetharaman, CEO Doha Bank expressed his immense pleasure at the successful completion of yet another edition of annual ECO-Schools Programme.

He also mentioned that it is a part of the ongoing efforts of Doha Bank towards developing and implementing green initiatives that spread awareness about environmental conservation and protection.

The enthusiastic environmentalists of DPS-Modern Indian School along with their Eco- Club in-charge Sudhansu Sekhar Mishra received the award from the Chief Guest, Ivonne A Baki, former Ambassador of Ecuador to Qatar. DPS-Modern Indian School's participation in the programme endorses its commitment towards sustainable development.

7th Qatar International Boat Show postponed

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Khalid Essa Al Mannai, Chairman, Al Mannai Plus Events, the organisers of the sole luxury yachts show 'Qatar International Boat Show', has announced a postponement of 7th Qatar International Boat Show.

The 7th International Boat Show was scheduled to be held from March 18-21 2020 at Porto Arabia, The Pearl Qatar.

Khalid Issa Al Mannai said that in view of the current situation brought upon by COVID-19 and in the interest of the health and safety of representatives of our partners, sponsors, participating companies and visitors, on the advise of the local authorities, the event has been postponed.

Al Mannai regrets the inconvenience this may have caused and appreciates the support of all parties concerned and stakeholders during these times.

Iran reports 97 new deaths from virus, taking total to 611

Confirmed cases of coronavirus in the country rose to 12,729 yesterday.

AFP — TEHRAN

Iran said yesterday that the novel coronavirus has claimed 97 more lives, raising the country's total to 611, as the number of confirmed cases jumped again.

Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said that "1,365 fresh cases have been added to the number of confirmed infections in the past 24 hours", bringing the total to 12,729.

Jahanpour told a televised news conference that more than 4,300 of those with confirmed infections had recovered so far.

Tehran province had the highest number of new cases with 347, followed by Isfahan with 155 and the northern region of Alborz with 134.

"Naturally, the number of confirmed cases will increase" even more as Iran steps up its laboratory sampling and tests, he said.

The outbreak in Iran is one of the deadliest outside of China, where the disease originated.

But Tehran's markets were still crowded despite calls for people to stay at home, with many shopping ahead of the country's New Year holidays which start on March 20.

The ministry said on Friday that the average age of those who died was 67. The youngest was a three-year-old leukaemia sufferer and the oldest 91.

Four times as many men as women died from the novel coronavirus.

But in some of Iran's provinces alcohol poisoning was killing even more people than the virus. At least 92 have died from drinking methanol after rumours circulated that it can help to cure or protect from the virus, and the number has been on the rise for the past few days.

Iran is also preparing for its traditional fire festival, or Chaharshanbe Soori, held annually on the last Wednesday evening before the spring holiday of Nowrouz.

Iranians traditionally jump over fires and light fireworks to celebrate the event, with many suffering burns and being hospitalised.

The interior ministry has ordered firefighters and medical services to be on the alert, but the head of a hospital specialising in the treatment of burns suggested the government ban the ceremony amid the virus outbreak.

"People suffering burns while the coronavirus is out there is a big nightmare," Mostafa Dehmardei, head of Tehran's Motahari hospital, told semi-official news agency ISNA.

Several politicians and officials, both sitting and former, have been infected with the new coronavirus, and some have died from the illness.

The latest suspected case of infection was Ali Akbar Velayati, who advises Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on foreign policy.

Iran's official coronavirus committee also held its meeting chaired by President Hassan Rouhani on Friday via videoconference.

Pictures of the meeting that have been released show ministers with masks tuning in from their offices. The foreign ministry on Friday thanked other countries for sending aid in the form of cash and medical equipment to combat the outbreak. The government and people of Iran would "never forget their friends" at a time of hardship, spokesman Abbas Mousavi tweeted.

He thanked Azerbaijan, Britain, China, France, Germany, Japan, Qatar, Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Iran said on Thursday that it has sought immediate financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund to help it fight the virus, in what would be its first such loan in decades.



Health workers disinfect a street in the city of Sulaimaniyah, in the Kurdish autonomous region of northern Iraq, yesterday, as part of measures against COVID-19.

Oman closes all educational institutions for one month

QNA — MUSCAT

The Omani authorities announced yesterday the suspension of studies in all educational institutions in the country, as part of the measures they are taking to confront the new coronavirus (COVID-19).

Based on the epidemiological data and indicators of Corona disease locally and globally, and within the framework of the World Health Organization classification of this disease as a global pandemic, and the Supreme Committee for Dealing with the Virus in Oman has determined that the decision will enter into force today (Sunday, March 15) and will last for a month, according to the Omani News Agency.

"The Supreme Committee on COVID-19 has called on families to keep their children home during this class suspension period," Oman's News Agency added.

The Committee called on everyone not to go to various kinds of gathering places and to abide by the requirements of prevention at the individual and collective level.

Syria to delay parliamentary elections to May 20 on coronavirus concerns

REUTERS/ANATOLIA — BEIRUT

Syria will postpone parliamentary elections to May 20 from April 13 as a precautionary step against the spread of coronavirus, a statement from the President's office said yesterday.

The country has shut schools, cancelled most public events and minimised public sector hours to prevent any spreading of the coronavirus, as officials said the war-ravaged country was still free of the disease despite reports it was hiding cases.

Addressing a news conference yesterday, Education Minister Imad Al Azab said schools would be shut until April 2 while Syria monitors the virus, and said it was "not possible" for the government to hide cases as some have claimed.

The government said on Friday that all scientific, cultural, social and sporting events would be halted, and many public institutions would be closed or staffed at 40% and have their hours reduced, according to state news agency SANA.

The Health Ministry said the steps were "preventative" and "precautionary" and intended to raise the health sector's readiness to control the virus should it emerge.

Syria is just one of three countries in the Middle East that have yet to announce a confirmed case along with Libya and Yemen. All three could face daunting challenges containing an outbreak amid health systems ravaged by years of war.

Syria has suspended flights to and from several countries hit by the virus including Iran, with which it has extensive ties. Iranian militias back Damascus in its nine-year war.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said Syrian doctors had detected cases of the virus in Damascus and at least three other provinces but were under orders to keep quiet. Azab denied this.

"There are some saying that there are infections being hidden, but no government nor the ministry of health can cover up a disease," said Azab. "If a disease is somewhere it wants to spread, so it's very hard to hide it."

Meanwhile, the Palestinian government reported three new cases of coronavirus in the West Bank city of Bethlehem yesterday.

Speaking at a press conference in Ramallah, government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem said the new cases take to 38 the total infections in the West Bank.

The Palestinian authorities recorded the first coronavirus case in Bethlehem on March 5.

Jordan suspends all flights, closes places of worship

AFP — AMMAN

Jordan said yesterday it would halt flights, close its land borders and shut down schools, places of worship and public gatherings to stop the spread of novel coronavirus.

Prime Minister Omar Al Razzaz told official news agency Petra that "all flights into and out of the kingdom will be suspended from Tuesday until further notice".

He said exceptions would be made for cargo flights and those carrying diplomats and staff of international organisations, providing they follow health ministry guidelines — including a two-week quarantine.

"All land and sea crossings and airports are closed except for cargo," he added, saying Jordanians in neighbouring countries who needed to return could do so but would also face quarantine. He also announced that the country's mosques and churches would be closed and that hospital and prison visits would be suspended.

Cases in Lebanon at 93; toll 3

ANATOLIA — BEIRUT

The total number of coronavirus cases in Lebanon has risen to 93, the Lebanese Health Ministry said yesterday.

In a statement, the ministry called on citizens to "adhere to the strict measures issued by the official references and to stay at home except when absolutely necessary". The country has reported three deaths from the virus so far.

Yemen rebels close Sana'a airport over virus

AFP — SANA'A

Yemen's Houthi rebels said yesterday they would suspend passenger flights in and out of Sana'a airport for two weeks to prevent the introduction of novel coronavirus.

A military coalition battling the rebels has long controlled Yemen's airspace and the capital's airport had served only rare United Nations and humanitarian flights since 2016.

But the insurgents announced "the temporary halting of all passenger flights" for two weeks.

Yemen has not to date announced any cases of the COVID-19 illness, but the poor state of the country's health infrastructure after five years of war would mean that such an outbreak could be catastrophic.

Yemen has over three million displaced people and over a third of the population needs humanitarian aid, according to the UN.



Health officials carry out disinfecting works at Martyrs' Memorial as part of the precautionary measures against COVID-19 outbreak in Gallipoli Peninsula of Canakkale, Turkey, yesterday.

Turkey, Azerbaijan suspend road and air links to travellers

ANATOLIA — ANKARA

The Turkish and Azerbaijani Presidents in a phone call yesterday decided to temporarily suspend all road and air transportation between the countries.

According to a statement from the Turkish Communications Directorate, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ilham Aliyev took the measure in the wake of concerns over the coronavirus pandemic.

The restriction, however, only applies to travellers and excludes cargo.

Turkey has so far confirmed five cases of coronavirus.

The country has taken several measures to stem the virus such as temporarily closing schools and universities, halting events and public activities, postponing foreign visits, and barring spectators at sports events.

After emerging in China last December, the novel coronavirus, officially known as COVID-19, has spread to 129 countries and territories.

The global death toll from the virus has crossed 5,300 with more than 142,000 cases confirmed worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, which has termed Europe as the new epicenter of the virus.

A vast majority of those who get infected recover from the illness.



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EDITORIAL

Need of peaceful coexistence

THE world today is not the one we used to know three decades ago, or before the emergence of the globalisation which has linked the countries by a fast and easy communication system. We are living in different part of the world but actually we are now living in a global village, thanks to the ever-evolving technology which has made borders irrelevant.

One year ago, on Friday, March 15, 2019, an Australian man driven by hatred and religious extremism killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, in New Zealand. New Zealand is marking today the first anniversary of that inhumane act to make its people and our entire "global village" learn a brutal lesson from that crime about the real meaning of love and tolerance, respect and co-existence.

A lesson that every one of us thinks already knew, but experiencing these heinous crimes make us realise something deeper. Victims were people who came to the country, seeking protection, safe asylum and they were not attacked because of being immigrants, but because of their faith which was the only common factor among them. Among them were children who did not understand what was going on and why.

Under the globalisation, peace is no longer a local issue. Every painful incident and criminal attacks in any part of the world, makes the world mourn together and offer collective help.

At a news conference, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Friday that "New Zealand and its people have fundamentally changed" since the attacks.

"The challenge for us will be ensuring in our everyday actions and every opportunity where we see bullying, harassment, racism, discrimination, calling it out as a nation," she said.

Few weeks ago, people in some parts of the world were undermining COVID-19 which has now been declared a pandemic. It was once confined to China and perhaps then to Iran, but today it has reached to over 182 countries. The number of infected people is dramatically growing despite difficult decision of border closures and suspension of flights, markets and all sorts of businesses.

So the issue is same like any attack on innocent people, or disasters in any parts of the world where people show solidarity and provide support.

Our understanding of the world needs to keep pace with the changes taking place in our "global village" where every day people are coming closer. Competition and conflict of interests should not govern our behaviour. There should be a huge space for values of solidarity, mercy, tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

The Peninsula
Local focus, Global vision

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The fall of OPEC+ and the age of oil price wars



NIKOLAY KOZHANOV
AL JAZEERA

For a while, it seemed as if Russia and Saudi Arabia were building a strong new relationship based on common interests in the Middle East and the oil sector. In December 2016, the joint efforts of Riyadh and Moscow led to the signing of the Vienna Agreement between OPEC and 11 non-OPEC countries (10 now, as Equatorial Guinea joined OPEC in 2017), which aimed at decreasing oil production to prevent the fall of oil prices and ensure their stability.

The initial six-month deal was then extended several times. It also led to the formation of a permanent forum-like structure - the so-called OPEC+ - with its own charter signed in July 2019, which allowed participants to coordinate and adjust their production policies.

> **What happened on March 6 surprised many, but not those who had been watching Russia closely. In Vienna, Saudi Arabia tried to push for additional oil production cuts to compensate for the slump in demand for oil due to the coronavirus.**



This format proved to be effective and achieved, at least temporarily, relatively high and stable oil prices. In December 2019, the deal was extended until April 2020 and it was taken for granted that OPEC+ would continue leveraging the market with production cuts beyond 2020.

In the meantime, Russian and Saudi Arabian officials exchanged visits and signed various memoranda of understanding on political and economic issues.

What happened on March 6 surprised many, but not those who had been watching Russia closely. In Vienna, Saudi Arabia tried to push for additional oil production cuts to compensate for the slump in demand for oil due to the coronavirus. Russia not only rejected the move but also announced it will no longer abide by the previous cuts.

This basically led to the end of OPEC+ policies of production cuts. It was reportedly aimed at causing a drop in oil prices in order to hit US shale producers, who have continued to benefit from OPEC production cuts by expanding their market share. A price collapse could put some of these producers out of business as fracking has a high production cost. This is an argument which Igor Sechin, the head of the Russian oil giant Rosneft and the main opponent of Russia's participation in OPEC+, has repeatedly made. In February 2019, he even put it in an official letter to President Vladimir Putin, claiming that the OPEC+ deal to cut oil output was a "strategic threat" and played into the hands of the US.

Given that Shechin has been opposing production cuts for a while, the question that arises is, why now? The answer has much to do with Russia's domestic politics.

When Russia concluded the Vienna Agreement in 2016, the Russian leadership believed that it would help prepare the country for the Russian presidential elections in March 2018. Higher oil prices ensured the Kremlin's financial capacity to lead a successful electoral campaign.

In the run-up to the 2018 election, it was important for the regime to demonstrate a strong economic performance and to show that Putin was able to deliver on his promises of economic growth. Higher oil revenue helped pull the country out of the 2015-2016 economic recession and guaranteed stable economic performance through 2019. It also allowed the regime to extend social security programmes and postpone painful austerity measures until after the vote. Putin was able to secure another six-year term with a high enough turnout and significantly high approval rating.

However, since then, the political goals of the Russian regime have changed, which require a different approach to cooperation with OPEC+. By 2020, the Russian authorities began preparations for the end of Putin's fourth term in power in 2024. This changed the regime's priorities - from satisfying the needs of the general population to ensuring the sustainability of the Kremlin's alliance with powerful tycoons, including those controlling oil production who would, in the end, either approve a successor to Putin or a constitutional amendment that would allow him to stay in power for two more terms. And not all of them were happy with Russia's participation in OPEC+. In February 2020, Sechin and Aleksandr Dyukov, the head of Gazprom Neft, again voiced their resistance to further production cuts under OPEC+ as it was going against their production development plans.

Yet, by the end of 2019, all existing "carrots" had already been used. The provision of further tax exemptions and financial support to Russian oil producers became economically unjustifiable while all potential loopholes in the Vienna Agreement that allowed the Russian producers to justify their low compliance with OPEC+ obligations had also already been used.

The Russian leadership finally accepted that the era of high oil prices was gone and that it will not come back. This new attitude towards the future of oil prices is clearly reflected in the state budget planning that is built on the assumption of prices floating between $50 and $60 per barrel (pb) until 2036 in the best-case scenario. These figures may even be pulled further down following Russia's decision to quit OPEC+.

By 2021-2023 Russia's oil output will also likely start to fall due to the natural depletion of old oil fields and lack of investment in development and exploration - it is projected that Russia's production will fall from 11.4 million bpd to 6.3 million barrels per day (bpd) by 2036. It will try to do its best to prepare for this by developing new oil production projects.

In this context, when Saudi Arabia proposed an additional 1.5 m bpd cut on top of the already existing ones, there was no reason for Russia to accept. It had already decided to pursue its own production strategy and no longer saw a reason to maintain its membership in OPEC+. What is more, Russia was not really convinced that such a cut would help the market stabilise given the drop in oil demand growth from 1.1m bpd to 650 - 800,000 bpd in 2020 and the expected growth in oil production by non-OPEC+ countries of 2m bpd in 2020. After Russia's rebuke, Saudi Arabia and others decided to go all in. Saudi Aramco not only announced that it would increase its crude supplies to the market from 9.7m bpd in January 2020 to 12.3m bpd in April, but also said it received instructions to increase its maximum sustainable oil output capacity to 13m bpd. Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), meanwhile, promised to raise its output to 4m bpd in April, and speed up its production capacity development efforts to pass the 5m bpd threshold in the future.

Under these circumstances, Russia's response seems to be quite modest: according to its minister of energy, Aleksandr Novak, in the short-term, Moscow is planning to increase supply to the market just by 300,000 bpd with the potential of adding another 200,000 bpd in the long run. The increase in oil supplies to the market will drive oil prices down and launch an economic "war of attrition" between oil producers. In the end, the companies that have the capacity to survive a prolonged period of low oil prices will succeed in securing their share of the market and win the war.

Moscow's limited capacity to increase oil output means it will be unable to compensate for all losses caused by the reduction in prices by upping its production. However, the oil price Russia needs to keep its budget balanced is lower than the one needed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE ($42 pb compared to $70-80 pb). In other words, to survive the fall in oil prices, Russia will need to draw fewer reserves from its National Welfare Fund compared to its rivals.

For now, both Russia and Saudi Arabia appear to have the economic capacity to sustain a price level of $35 pb for four to five years. The rest will be determined by luck.

So will this move destroy the US shale industry? It is estimated that $40 pb will only slow its production growth, while $30 pb will keep it approximately at the level of December 2019. In order to make the US oil production fall, prices would have to either go below $20 pb or stay in the margin of $30-40 beyond 2020. And this is without taking into account Trump's readiness to provide economic aid to the shale industry to protect it from the worst effects of the reduction in prices.

Moscow made the move to allow OPEC+ to collapse because it believed it could keep a balanced budget amid a drop in oil prices, at least for a while. It also probably expected other participants to get scared and succumb to its demand to not deepen production cuts without taking any major retaliatory action. It never expected OPEC+ countries to start preparations for a fully-fledged trade war. The unexpectedly harsh response it received scared Moscow.

Nikolay Kozhanov is a research associate professor at the Gulf Studies Center of Qatar University.



Quote of the day

We want to hold the Olympics as planned without any trouble by overcoming the spread of infections. We will respond by closely coordinating with officials concerned, including the IOC.

Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan

Renewed rocket attacks on Iraq base, three US troops wounded

AFP — BAGHDAD

A fresh spate of rockets targeted yesterday an Iraqi base north of Baghdad where foreign troops are deployed, Iraqi and US security sources said, in a rare daytime attack.

It was the 23rd such attack since late October on installations across Iraq where American troops and diplomats are based, with the latest rounds growing deadlier.

None of the attacks have ever been claimed but the US has blamed hardline elements of the Hashed Al Shaabi, a network of armed groups incorporated into the Iraqi state.

At least 33 rockets hit Iraqi air defence units at the Taji air base yesterday, the country's military said, in one of the largest such volleys yet.

"The initial toll is two wounded Iraqi Air Defence personnel who are in very critical condition," said Tahsin al-Khafaji, spokesman for Iraq's

At least 33 rockets hit Iraqi air defence units at the Taji air base yesterday.

Joint Operations Command.

The US-led coalition said three of its members were also wounded in the attack.

Iraq's military said it had found another 24 missiles at a nearby launching site and had detained the owner of the plot of land as well as security forces from an adjacent checkpoint for questioning.

The US-led coalition's surveillance capabilities have been impaired by cloudy weather in recent days, which a US official said may have contributed to the attackers' readiness to launch the rockets during the day instead of under the cover of night.

Taji is overcrowded with members of the US-led coalition helping Iraq fight militants, after units were moved to the air base from other installations.

It came three days after a similar attack on the base killed two American military personnel and a British soldier — the deadliest such incident at an Iraqi base in years.

The US responded on Friday with air strikes on arms depots it said were used by Kataeb Hezbollah, an Iran-aligned faction within the Hashed.

At least five members of Iraq's security forces and one civilian were killed, none of them members of the Hashed, according to Iraq's military.

Iraq has long feared it would get caught in the spiralling tensions between Iran and the US, its two main allies.

They dramatically spiked in late 2019 when a US contractor was killed in a rocket attack on a separate base in northern Iraq, leading to retaliatory American strikes on Kataeb Hezbollah.

Days later, a US drone strike killed Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani and Hashed deputy chief Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis.

Iran launched ballistic missiles at US troops in Iraq while the Iraqi parliament voted to expel all foreign soldiers from its soil, a decision that has yet to be implemented.

Some 5,200 American troops are based in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition helping local troops root out the remnants of the Islamic State group.

Top US military and civilian officials had long expressed frustration that Iraq's government was not doing enough to prevent rocket attacks targeting US troops and diplomats.



Mourners walk with coffins during a funeral march for members of the Hashed Al Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces) paramilitaries who were killed in a US military air strikes, in Najaf, Iraq, yesterday.

Tourists stranded as Morocco cuts links to Europe over virus

AFP — FNIDEQ, MOROCCO

Tourists were stranded in Morocco yesterday after the kingdom announced strict border restrictions in response to the coronavirus, leaving travellers stuck at borders, ports and airports.

"We are lost!" said David, an Italian tourist waiting at the closed border with the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in northern Morocco.

Morocco suspended air, sea and land links with European countries and Algeria on Friday, as well as taking measures to confine citizens to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Flights to and from Algeria, Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal and Italy were suspended "until further notice", while sea links for passengers and Morocco's land borders with Ceuta and a second Spanish enclave, Melilla, were closed.

But France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced yesterday that Rabat had agreed to allow repatriation flights for French nationals.

The first flights back to France had taken off earlier yesterday, he said.

The closure of the only land border between Africa and the European Union at Ceuta and Melilla saw Spaniards rushing to leave on Thursday evening, as Moroccan day workers hastily returned in the opposite direction.

The land borders are busiest in summer, but the traffic never ordinarily stops flowing. Now though a Moroccan police roadblock bars the road towards the border with Cueta.

The border at Cueta, like that at Melilla, was reopened on Friday only for Spaniards. Except for a few travellers, the normally busy border post near the Moroccan town of Fnideq was deserted.

At the service station, camper vans bearing various European license plates were parked waiting.

Moroccan authorities have reported 17 cases of COVID-19, including one death. France and Spain have together announced more than 210 COVID-19 deaths. On the Spanish side at Cueta, stuck Moroccans were wondering why their country would not let them back in.

At Tangiers port some 30 kilometres to the west, containers and trucks were unloaded as usual but the passenger terminal was closed.

The busiest port in North Africa, the facility welcomed 568,000 foreign tourists in 2019, while some 473,000 entered from Cueta and Melilla, according to official figures.

The travel restrictions are causing panic in the kingdom's tourism sector, which accounts for 10 percent of GDP and is a key source of foreign exchange.



Moroccan police refuse entry to passengers at the border crossing between the Moroccan city of Fnideq and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, on Friday.

Guinea to hold constitutional vote on March 22

AFP — CONAKRY

Guinea's President Alpha Conde has set March 22 for the constitutional referendum on his proposed reforms that opponents worry will allow him to bypass term limits and stay in power.

The vote, originally set for March 1 but delayed over local and international concerns about its fairness, will take place at the same time as legislative elections, a presidential decree said on Friday.

The campaign will run until March 20 despite some restrictions put in place on rallies since the first case of coronavirus was confirmed in the country.

The West African country has seen huge opposition rallies over the proposal to change the constitution, which many fear will allow Conde, 82, to seek a third term in office this year.

Since the protests began in October at least 31 protesters and one gendarme have been killed.

International powers have voiced concern over the referendum, and a US official on Friday renewed a call for an investigation into the deaths since October.

"The United States remains concerned about the Government of Guinea's plans to hold legislative elections and a constitutional referendum," a State Department official said. "We continue to urge all parties to engage in nonviolent civil dialogue," he said.

The former French colony's constitution now mandates two five-year presidential terms. Under the new constitution, there would be two six-year terms.

But critics say the new constitution would also reset the term counter to zero.

Senegal closes schools, bans Independence Day events

AFP — DAKAR

Senegal's President Macky Sall yesterday announced strict measures aimed at slowing the spread of coronavirus, including banning public gatherings, closing schools and cancelling April 4 Independence Day festivities.

"I have decided, first of all, to ban all public events for 30 days throughout the country," Sall said on national television following an emergency meeting. The President also announced a temporary ban on cruise ships docking in Senegal and the introduction of systematic health controls at all borders.

He also cancelled the official festivities to mark the 60th anniversary of independence from France and closed all schools and universities for three weeks beginning Monday.

The ban on gatherings will hit a series of Muslim festivals due in March. Calls have grown recently to ban such events which can attract hundreds of thousands of Muslim faithful. Senegal is nation of some 16 million people where over 90 percent are Muslim.

Senegal has confirmed the second most coronavirus cases in sub-Saharan Africa, behind South Africa, which has reported 38.

The region did not record its first case until February 28 in Nigeria, but there are now dozens of cases across at least 16 countries.

114 South Africans flown back from Wuhan; cases rise to 38

AFP — POLOKWANE, S AFRICA

South Africa repatriated dozens of its citizens from China yesterday over the coronavirus, the health ministry said, the first such move by a sub-Saharan country as cases across the region continue to rise.

The 114 South Africans were working and studying in Wuhan city, which was placed under lockdown for around two months after the novel coronavirus was first detected in December.

They landed at Polokwane International Airport in South Africa's northern Limpopo province, where they will be quarantined in a remote resort for a maximum of 21 days, authorities said.

The ministry later announced 14 new cases of coronavirus infections in South Africa — the highest increase to date — bringing the country's tally up to 38.

President Cyril Ramaphosa ordered the repatriation late last month, after the anxious families of several South Africans in Wuhan asked the government to evacuate them.

The returnees were met by a team of health officials in white medical protective suits.

Wearing masks, they were swiftly loaded into coaches and driven 30 kilometres to the resort under police escort.

Government officials have assured that none of the group are infected by the virus and that the quarantine measures are only a precaution.

To date South Africa has the highest number of coronavirus infections in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by 21 in Senegal.

No deaths have been recorded so far, and there have not yet been any restrictions on travel or public gatherings.

An urgent Cabinet meeting is scheduled today to discuss new responses to the pandemic.

Sub-Saharan Africa remains largely unscathed, with less than 50 detected cases in 18 countries and one death in Sudan.

The majority of people contracted the virus abroad, and there have been very few local transmissions in the region.

But the number of affected countries has multiplied over the past two days.

Kenya announced the first confirmed case in East Africa on Friday, and later that day eSwatini became the second country in southern Africa to announce a case.

Namibia yesterday confirmed its first two cases.

Anti-government protest

An Algerian woman waves a national flag as she takes part in an anti-government demonstration in the capital Algiers, yesterday.

Two Western hostages kidnapped in Burkina Faso found in Mali

AFP — BAMAKO

A Canadian woman and an Italian man kidnapped in Burkina Faso in 2018 have been found in good health in the northwest of Mali after fleeing their captors and were set to be repatriated, diplomatic and UN sources said yesterday.

Tedith Blais and Luca Tacchetto, both in their thirties, managed to escape near the northern city of Kidal on Friday and were taken to the local base of the UN mission in Mali, known by its French acronym MINUSMA.

The pair were then flown out yesterday afternoon on a special plane to Mali's capital Bamako.

They appeared in good spirits but seemed taken aback when greeted by the Malian, UN and Canadian officials with extended elbows. The pair were then informed about the coronavirus crisis and the new social etiquette.

A health official sporting a mask and protective gear then took their temperature. The couple, who were wearing white T-shirts, did not speak to reporters.

They were then due to be taken to the presidential palace before being repatriated.

Malian Foreign Minister Tiebile Drame said no ransom had been paid.

The pair were dressed like Tuaregs and apparently stopped a passing car and told the driver to take them to the nearest UN post. There was no detailed information on their escape or the identity of the kidnappers.

South Korea sees steady drop in new virus cases for second day

REUTERS — SEOUL

South Korea reported more recoveries from the coronavirus than new infections yesterday for the second day in a row, as a downward trend in daily cases raised hopes that Asia's biggest epidemic outside China may be slowing.

The Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) recorded 107 new coronavirus cases yesterday compared with 110 a day earlier, taking the national tally to 8,086.

In contrast, 204 patients were released from hospitals where they had been isolated for treatment. The death toll rose by one to 73.

For the second day in a row the daily number of recovered people exceeded that of new confirmed cases since South Korea's first patient was confirmed on January 20.

With the latest figures, South Korea has continued to see a steady drop in the number of new cases, raising hopes that the outbreak may be slowing in Asia's fourth-largest economy.

Officials, however, urged to stay vigilant as the emergence of clusters of infection in the capital Seoul and metropolitan areas continues.

"It's the weekend, and we understand that you feel frustrated, but please stay at home and avoid contacting with other people as much as possible," a health ministry official told a briefing.



Shoppers wearing face masks amid concerns over novel coronavirus in Seoul, yesterday.

The Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention recorded 107 new coronavirus cases yesterday compared with 110 a day earlier, taking the national tally to 8,086. In contrast, 204 patients were released from hospitals where they had been isolated for treatment.

Of the latest 107 cases, 62 were from the hard-hit south-eastern city of Daegu where a fringe Christian church at the centre of the epidemic is located, while 15 and 13 were in Gyeonggi and Seoul, respectively. Daegu and Gyeongbuk province have seen a drop in new case numbers.

South Korea, which has the second highest number of infections in Asia after China, has been testing hundreds of thousands of people and tracking potential carriers like detectives, using cell phone and satellite technology.

The KCDC has distributed guidelines for publishing travel logs of coronavirus patients to local government, factoring in the National Human Rights Commission of Korea's suggestions to ensure both public health protection and privacy, said Kwon Jun-wook, deputy director at the KCDC, at a briefing.

The guidelines advise not to include private information such as detailed residence addresses and workplaces.

The new coronavirus has infected more than 138,000 people worldwide and left more than 5,000 dead.

Kerala to monitor entry points; over 7,000 under observation

IANS — THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Though no fresh COVID-19 case has been reported from Kerala since Friday evening, the total number of people under observation in the state has crossed 7,000.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has told officials that health screening should be started at all entry points in the state.

As of yesterday, there are 19 corona-positive cases and all of them are stable and there are 7,677 people under observations at homes and hospitals.

Speaking to the media after chairing a review meeting here in the state capital, Vijayan told the media that the screening process would be strengthened at airports, trains and at 24 road crossings bordering neighbouring Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

"At airports, the screening teams would be led by Superintendents of Police along with other professionals. Our medical teams will enter trains at the first station and check pasengers. Likewise, screening at 24 entry points on road will also see basic health protocols being followed," said Vijayan.

He, however, ruled out closing down shopping malls in the state.

"It has also been decided to set up corona care centres near four airports and all those who have to be isolated will have to spend their designated isolation time at such centres," said Vijayan.

"With regards to the IT industry, it has been decided to quarantine all those who return from foreign assignments for 14 days at their homes," added Vijayan.

As of yesterday afternoon, the following districts have coronavirus positive patients: as many as seven cases in Pathanamthitta, four in Kottayam, three each in Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram and one each in Thrissur and Kannur.

Passengers wearing face masks collect their luggage at the airport, in New Delhi, yesterday.

In the state capital, where on Friday three fresh positive cases were reported, the general advisory that has come is: it's time that malls, beaches meeting places should be avoided. The state-owned indoor stadium has been closed.

An Italian tourist who was at Varkala for the past two weeks, about 40km from here, after testing positive has been moved to the Medical College Hospital. The beach destination is largely deserted.

The resort where he was staying for the past two weeks has been closed.

"Nine people who might have had direct contact with the Italian have been quarantined. We have also traced the route of the other two who turned positive. Things are in control, but we must be more cautious", said District Collector K. Gopalakrishnan.



Taking precaution

People wear face masks on a train as a precaution against new coronavirus, in Bangkok, yesterday.

HK 'Umbrella' movement leader freed from prison

REUTERS — HONG KONG

Hong Kong democracy activist Chan Kin-man walked free from prison yesterday saying he had no regrets for his leading role in the 2014 "Umbrella" civil disobedience movement and that sacrifice was needed to achieve universal suffrage.

"Life in prison was difficult, but I have no regret at all... as this is a necessary price to pay for fighting for democracy," Chan said, chanting "I want universal suffrage" with dozens of supporters.

"I think after the last few months, Hong Kong people understand more why we had to use civil disobedience to fight for freedom."

A retired sociologist and one of the three leaders of the pro-democracy movement, Chan was found guilty last year of conspiracy to commit public nuisance for his role in planning and mobilising supporters during the 79-day protest that brought parts of the Chinese-ruled city to a standstill.

The Umbrella protests staged peaceful sit-ins, blocking major roads in the Asian financial hub, in a push for full democracy, although they failed to wrest concessions from Beijing.

Coronavirus may survive for many hours in air, say researchers in study

IANS — NEW DELHI

In a significant find, researchers now report that the novel coronavirus can survive in the air for hours in fine particles known as aerosols, and can spread quickly like SARS.

This turns the earlier thinking right on its head that coronavirus only spreads from surface and is not present in the air, especially near health care settings and hospitals.

Researchers found that COVID-19 can be detected up to three hours after aerosolization and can infect cells throughout that time.

Researchers found that COVID-19 can be detected up to three hours after aerosolization and can infect cells throughout that time period, reports Live Science. However, the study, posted on the preprint database medRxiv, is still preliminary, because it has not undergone extensive peer-review.

"The authors did receive comments from one prospective scientific journal, and posted an updated version of the study on March 13 reflecting the revisions," said the report.

"We still don't know how high a concentration of viable SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) s needed in practice to infect a human being, though this is something we are looking to model in the future," study co-author Dylan Morris from Princeton University, told Live Science. Aerosols can potentially travel across far greater distances. In the current study, the researchers did not examine how far SARS-CoV-2 could conceivably travel through the air.

"More important, even if aerosol transmission can occur, it's unlikely to be the primary force driving the current pandemic," Morris said.

The current scientific consensus is that most new coronavirus transmission are via respiratory secretions in the form of large respiratory droplets on surface. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, can last on surfaces potentially several hours, or even days, according to another preprint published by researchers at the National Institutes of Health, Princeton, and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Vietnam to refuse visitors from UK and Schengen area

REUTERS — HANOI

Vietnam will deny entry and stop issuing tourist visas to citizens from Europe's Schengen visa-free area and Britain starting from today, amid concerns over the spreading coronavirus, its foreign ministry said.

The restriction will start from midday today following a proposal from the country's prime minister, the ministry said in a statement on its website.

Visas on arrival for all foreign nationals are also temporarily halted, it added.

The British embassy in Hanoi updated its travel advice on a UK government website.

"From noon Vietnam time, today, all foreign nationals will be refused entry to Vietnam if in the previous 14 days they have been to the UK, or any Schengen country, even in transit," said the statement.

"This restriction will be in place for 30 days." The Schengen area is a border control-free travel zone comprising 26 European countries.

Vietnam earlier halted visa-free travel for citizens of eight European countries.

Following the government's restriction, the national carrier Vietnam Airlines said it would stop carrying passengers from Paris, London and Frankfurt to Vietnam from today, while flights from Vietnam to those destinations would still be operated as normal.

Three weeks after Vietnam declared that all 16 of its coronavirus cases had recovered, the number of infected patients is on the rise after the authorities said a spate of new infections was traced to a flight from Britain. Vietnam has confirmed 49 cases of the coronavirus. There have been no deaths in the country.

Malaysia reports 41 new cases of virus

REUTERS — KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia reported 41 new coronavirus cases yesterday, most linked to a religious event on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur that was attended by about 10,000 people from several countries.

The new cases bring the total number of infected people in the Southeast Asian country to 238, the health ministry said in a statement.

A total of 77 cases in Malaysia have now been confirmed as linked to the same event held at a mosque between February 27 and March 1.

Prime Minister Muyiddin Yassin said on Friday that the country was facing a "second wave" of infections, and warned of an impact on economic growth.

To contain the spread of the virus, all gatherings including international meetings, sports, social and religious events would be cancelled or postponed until after April, he said.

In neighbouring Brunei, 38 of the total 40 cases in the country had been linked to the religious gathering as of Saturday.

A total of 85 Bruneians attended the gathering, and 18 tested positive. The remainder of the 38 are their immediate family members, friends or co-workers, the health ministry said.

New cases in Brunei include a 9-month-old baby, the child of a man who attended the religious event.

The speaker of Brunei's legislative council called for the current session to end yesterday, a week ahead of schedule and bringing an abrupt end to budget discussions, because of the coronavirus outbreak.

China sees virus cases from outside exceed local infections for first time

REUTERS — BEIJING

The number of new coronavirus cases imported into mainland China from overseas surpassed the number of locally transmitted new infections for the first time on Friday, data released by the National Health Commission showed yesterday.

Mainland China had 11 new confirmed cases on Friday, up from eight cases a day earlier, but only four of those — all in the virus epicentre of Hubei province — were locally transmitted.

Mainland China had 11 new confirmed cases on Friday, up from eight cases a day earlier, but only four of those — all in the virus epicentre of Hubei province — were locally transmitted.

The other seven — including four in the financial hub of Shanghai, one in the capital Beijing and two in the northwestern province of Gansu — were all detected in travellers coming into China from overseas, specifically Italy, the United States and Saudi Arabia, according to local authorities.

The numbers underscore how China, where the outbreak began in December, appears to now face a greater threat of new infections from outside its borders as it continues to slow the spread of the virus domestically.

A total of 95 cases have entered mainland China from overseas, the commission said.

Hubei has now seen new infections fall for nine straight days. All four of the new cases on Friday, down from five a day earlier, were in provincial capital Wuhan.

The death toll from the outbreak in mainland China had reached 3,189 as of the end of Friday, up by 13 from the previous day. All of the latest deaths were in Hubei and 10 of them were in Wuhan.

To date, the flu-like virus has infected 80,824 people in mainland China, the commission said. Globally, more than 138,000 people have been infected and over 5,000 have died, according to a tally of government announcements.

As China's imported cases rise, the city of Tangshan, a steel-making hub in northern China's Hebei province, warned people entering the city — whether Chinese or overseas nationals — against trying to conceal their travel history.

People who do so will have to bear all treatment costs if they are later found to have contracted coronavirus, the Tangshan city government said in a statement.

Of the newly imported Shanghai cases, three were Chinese people who worked in Italy and flew to Shanghai via Moscow, according to the city's municipal health commission, while the fourth was an Italian who flew in from Italy via Paris.

Italy, the first European Union member state to suspend flights to China in the wake of the outbreak, is the worst affected country in Europe, reporting a total 17,660 cases by Friday.

It also has a much higher fatality rate than most other countries, with 7 percent of those testing positive for the virus dying.

Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke to his Italian counterpart Sergio Mattarella over the phone to offer his "sincere condolences" to the Italian people over the crisis, CCTV reported on Saturday.

Xi also held phone calls with the presidents of two other severely hit countries, Iran and South Korea, again expressing condolences, the state broadcaster said.



Passengers wearing face masks ride on a boat to cross the Yangtze river to Jiangzhou township, in Jiujiang, China's central Jiangxi province, yesterday.

Pakistan responds positively to Modi's offer on virus coordination

INTERNEWS — ISLAMABAD

In a late night development, Pakistan has responded positively to the proposal by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, calling for the video conference of leaders of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to discuss how to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Originated in China late last year, COVID-19 has so far claimed over 5,200 lives while affecting more than 130 countries around the world.

Out of total 140,000 infected, around 80,000 have so far recovered.

Modi, using his Twitter handle, sprang a surprise when he called for coordinated efforts by SAARC countries to deal with novel coronavirus earlier in the day. Responding to the offer, Foreign Office Spokesperson Aisha Farooqui acknowledged that the threat of COVID-19 required coordinated efforts at global and regional level.

"We have communicated that SAPM on Health [Dr Zafar Mirza] will be available to participate in the video conference of SAARC member countries on the issue," she tweeted.

It is not clear how India would respond to Pakistan's offer since Modi called the conference. Nevertheless, the development is seen as significant as the two neighbours have little or no channels of communication for over a year now.

On Thursday, the Foreign Office spokesperson said Pakistan was ready to cooperate and extend any assistance to its neighbours including India to deal with the coronavirus. The number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan and India is low but there is a threat of rise in the infected people.

India has confirmed that two people died because of coronavirus, while the number of cases in Pakistan has risen to 28, though, no death has been reported yet.

Meanwhile, Modi's refocus on SAARC is seen as departure from his four year old policy where he tried to ignore the regional grouping comprising Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan.

Policemen wearing face masks as a preventive measure against the spread of novel coronavirus stand at a checkpoint, in Islamabad, yesterday.

Sindh orders closure of wedding halls, shrines; festivals cancelled

INTERNEWS — KARACHI

Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has ordered the closure of wedding halls, shrines and festivals across the province to deal with the coronavirus outbreak.

Religious schools (Madrasahs) have also been told to suspend educational activities. The Sindh Disaster Management Authority has also been directed to start recruiting volunteers.

Moreover, Shah has also instructed Commissioner Sukkur to conduct the tests of pilgrims reaching the city. He had also directed the officials to keep him updated so decisions could be taken. The chief minister also directed his ministers to avoid attending public events.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Pakistan rose to 28 on Friday night, after seven more cases being reported.

Karachi has been the worst affected city so far, with 14 of the total confirmed cases. Of the remaining, five cases have been reported in Gilgit-Baltistan and one case has been reported each in Hyderabad and Quetta.

The health department has also been directed to set up a help desk at the district level and maintain contact with the Auqaf department.

Prayer leaders have also been asked to spread awareness about the coronavirus during Friday sermons and after daily prayers.

The inspector general of jails, Sindh has asked for all prisons in the province to be sterilised.

He has also issued instructions to staff not to use biometric attendance machines.

Meanwhile, prisoners and staff have been given safety masks and prisoners have been told to desist from physical contact with each other.

Educational institutes across the province will remain closed till May 30, 2020, the provincial government announced on Thursday.

Philippines declares night curfew in Manila to fight COVID-19

AP — MANILA

Philippine officials yesterday announced a nighttime curfew in the capital and said people in the densely populated region should leave their homes during the daytime only for work or urgent errands under restrictions imposed to fight the coronavirus.

Drastic steps announced by President Rodrigo Duterte this past week sparked widespread confusion and questions, prompting officials yesterday to detail the measures and issue guidelines for the monthlong restrictions in Manila that will take effect today.

The measures include suspending domestic travel by land, air and sea to and from the capital region, home to more than 12 million people. Large gatherings like concerts and movies will be prohibited and most government work in executive department offices will be suspended in the metropolis. Suspensions of school classes at all levels were extended by a month.

A copy of the guidelines said the movement of people in the metropolis "shall be limited to accessing basic necessities and work."

"If you'll go to work, go. If you need to go out for medical treatment, go. If you'll buy food, go, but other than that, stay home," Interior Secretary Eduardo Ano told a news conference.

"We should practice social distancing." Philippine health officials reported 34 new coronavirus infections yesterday, bringing the total number of cases in the country to 98. Eight of the patients have died.

While the virus can be deadly, particularly for the elderly and those with other health problems, for most people it causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. Some feel no symptoms at all and the vast majority of people recover.

Ano said the 8pm-5am curfew, which was not among the restrictions announced by Duterte on Thursday, would apply to nonessential trips and leisure gatherings like parties, family reunions and concerts. Stressing the urgency of the move, he cited the case of Italy, where he said the numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths alarmingly spiked because effective containment steps were not put in place early.

A police general, Guillermo Eleazar, said cities and towns would enforce the curfew once their separate councils have authorised it in the next few days.

Ano warned that infections may exponentially increase to several thousands in five months in the Philippines if effective containment actions are not set in place.

New Zealand calls off mosque attack commemoration over virus fears

AFP — WELLINGTON

New Zealand has cancelled a national remembrance service to mark the first anniversary of the Christchurch mosque attacks because of coronavirus fears, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said.

"This is a pragmatic decision. We're very saddened to cancel, but in remembering such a terrible tragedy, we shouldn't create the risk of further harm being done," Ardern said yesterday.

The service to mark the March 15 mass shooting, when a self-avowed white supremacist opened fire at two mosques during Friday prayers, killing 51, had been expected to attract several thousand people, with many travelling from overseas. Ardern said New Zealand needed to take a precautionary approach.

"The advice we received for this event is that based on people travelling from different parts of the country and from overseas, if there was a case, it could be difficult to trace those who had come into contact with that person, so we are taking a cautious approach," she said.

"March 15 now becomes an opportunity for every New Zealander to reflect in their own way on the events of a year ago."

The unveiling of a remembrance plaque, also planned for today morning at Christchurch's main al-Noor mosque, has been postponed as a precautionary measure. Mosque spokesman Tony Green said they had taken the advice of health professionals and it was right not to go ahead with the two remembrance services.

"It would be unwise not to take health advice on coronavirus. It's very concerning," he said. "It would only need one person to be infected and it would be very difficult to track where the carrier travelled from."

Jakarta to close schools in bid to curb spread of virus

REUTERS — JAKARTA

Indonesia's capital city will close all schools and order remote teaching for at least two weeks to curb the spread of coronavirus, Jakarta's governor said yesterday, as the first cases were also reported in other parts of the archipelago.

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, reported 27 more coronavirus cases, bringing the total confirmed infections to 96, Achmad Yurianto, a health ministry official said.

The number of deaths rose to five, Yurianto said.

While most cases have been clustered in Jakarta, cases were also reported in cities in western and central Java, Manado on Sulawesi island and Pontianak on Borneo island.

"We must massively, in an integrated way and without panic, search and find, and isolate positive cases," Yurianto said, adding authorities were also shifting to "a community-based approach" to prevent healthy people from getting sick.

Doni Monardo, who leads Indonesia's task force on coronavirus, said testing will be increased and struggling medical staff will be assisted by medical students and volunteers.

As he announced school closures, Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan said cases had been detected in many parts of the city of 10 million people.

"What must be done right now is to reduce interactions between residents," Baswedan said, urging people to stay at home and not travel unless necessary.

"Children, based on data, not many of them have been infected with COVID-19, but they are carriers and they spread the virus from one adult to another," he told a news conference.

Doctors and nurses had been under strain trying to treat patients and some of them had been infected, Baswedan said.

Museums, parks and zoos would also close for two weeks.

The city of Solo in central Java has also announced school closures.

Indonesia confirmed its first cases of the virus only last week while some countries in the region had reported scores of cases far earlier, raising concerns among medical experts about infections either not being reported or going undetected.

The central government has faced criticism for withholding information regarding the spread of the virus.

Neighbouring Australia has advised its citizens to reconsider overseas travel plans including to Indonesia, citing a growing risk of transmission in the country and limited availability of testing and infection control facilities.

Britain to ban mass gatherings from next week to curb virus

REUTERS — LONDON

The British government will ban mass gatherings from next week in an attempt to curb the coronavirus outbreak, an escalation of its crisis plan that critics had said was too relaxed.

Health authorities in England announced yesterday a further 10 deaths caused by coronavirus, almost doubling the number of fatalities in Britain since Friday.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has so far resisted pressure to take some of the stringent measures adopted by other European countries to slow the spread of the virus.

"Ministers are working with the chief scientific adviser and chief medical officer on our plan to stop various types of public events, including mass gatherings, beginning next week," a government source said.

Health authorities in England announced yesterday a further 10 deaths caused by coronavirus, almost doubling the number of fatalities in Britain since Friday.

Legislation would be published next week to give the government powers to deal with the outbreak, including to stop mass gatherings and compensate organisations, the source said.

Some organisations have moved ahead of the government in terms of limiting public gatherings. On Friday, England's soccer

Queen Elizabeth, who is 93, cancelled some public engagements for next week due to the coronavirus outbreak, Buckingham Palace said on Friday.

Johnson postponed for a year local and mayoral elections in England that had been due to take place in May.

As of yesterday, 21 people had died after testing positive for COVID-19 in Britain.

"All 10 individuals were in the at-risk groups," Chris Whitty, chief medical officer for England, said in a statement.

"I understand this increase in the number of deaths linked to COVID-19 will be a cause for concern for many. The public should know every measure we are taking is seeking to save lives and protect the most vulnerable."

By comparison, on Friday Italy said its death toll from COVID-19 rose to 1,266 and France reported an increase to 79.

Britain's health ministry said the number of confirmed positive tests for coronavirus in the country rose to 1,140 on Saturday, a 43 percent increase from the figure of 798 given on Friday.

US President Donald Trump said on Friday that the United States might include Britain in a coronavirus travel ban that it has imposed on other European countries.

British media said the new ban on mass gatherings could affect events such as the Glastonbury music festival, the Wimbledon tennis championships and the Grand National horse race.

Scotland's devolved government said on Thursday all large gatherings above 500 people should be cancelled to help emergency services focus on the coronavirus outbreak.



People wearing medical masks as a precaution against coronavirus, in central London, yesterday.

Ireland cautions citizens about travel to other EU states

REUTERS — DUBLIN

Ireland advised its citizens on Friday to exercise a high degree of caution before deciding to travel to the rest of the European Union due to the spread of the coronavirus and restrictions other members states had put in place.

Ireland shut schools, universities and childcare facilities until at least March 29 on Friday and restricted mass gathering to slow the spread of the virus. The number of confirmed cases rose to 90 from 70 on Thursday.

Ireland had previously only urged against all travel to Italy and advised avoiding non-essential travel to China, Iran and Spain. The World Health Organisation said on Friday that Europe had become the epicentre of the pandemic.

"In light of rapidly changing conditions and restrictions across a number of EU countries, my department is now advising people to exercise 'a high degree of caution' before deciding to travel to other EU States," Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said on Twitter.

Coveney said in a separate tweet that the updated advice does not apply to neighbouring Britain, a former EU member. Ireland shares an open border with the smaller British-run region of Northern Ireland, which has so far reported 29 cases.

Ireland's health service provision chief earlier said that the country's contingency plans to fight the coronavirus if the outbreak becomes significantly worse includes seeking additional bed capacity in hotels.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) had received "significant offers" from the hotel sector, Paul Reid told a news conference, adding that he did not envisage having to go to such lengths to boost its capacity.

The hospitality sector is operating below capacity since the collapse of travel as a result of the global pandemic.

On Monday, Ireland cancelled all St. Patrick's Day parades which draw hundreds of thousands of revellers each March. The new curbs in Ireland sent shoppers rushing to supermarkets for the second straight day despite government pleas not to panic buy and left large parts of Dublin deserted.

Daily trips on public transport across the country were down 15-20 percent in recent days, the National Transport Authority said.



Ireland's Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar arrives at the North South Ministerial Council offices in Armagh, Northern Ireland, for a meeting on novel coronavirus, yesterday.

Czech govt closes shops, restaurants to fight virus

REUTERS — PRAGUE

The Czech government said it was shutting most shops and restaurants yesterday for 10 days as part of measures to contain the spread of the new coronavirus.

The measure, announced overnight, followed other restrictions imposed in past days, including closing schools and banning public events such as sports games or concerts.

From tomorrow, foreign travel will be banned and foreigners will be barred from entering the country.

Exceptions to the order on closing shops included food stores, pharmacies, banks, post offices, gas stations and takeaway food establishments.

"We wanted to avoid people going to shopping centres today," Prime Minister Andrej Babis told a news conference yesterday, broadcast on television. Interior Minister Jan Hamacek said the government's aim was to spread out the rise of infections over time to reduce the strain on the health system.

"We need people to go to work but stay home afterwards," Hamacek said.

"Those (countries) who have managed to do something about the situation say... limit interaction among people."

The government has been under fire on social media for taking a heavy-handed approach while not testing people more widely.

'Yellow Vests' protesters defy virus ban, hundreds protest in French capital

REUTERS — PARIS

Several hundred anti-government "Yellow Vest" protesters demonstrated in Paris yesterday, defying a ban on mass gatherings that aims to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

In a televised address to the nation on Thursday, President Emmanuel Macron announced school closures and urged people to avoid close contact for fear of propagating the virus that has killed 79 people in France and infected more than 3,600.

The government on Friday banned all gatherings with more than 100 people. Paris police had already turned down requests for protesters to convene at sensitive sites yesterday, including the Champs Elysees where there were violent clashes between security forces and protesters almost a year ago to the day.

"It's Saturday, demonstration day. Some people think that the coronavirus won't touch them and refuse to respect the advice," said a riot police officer in front of a heavily armed vehicle blocking the road that leads to the presidential palace.

Central Paris had earlier been in lockdown, with police searching bags over concerns the protesters would seek to return to the Champs Elysees. The police cordon had been eased by lunch time.

The government published an official decree yesterday stopping all non-essential gatherings, but hundreds of protesters, some wearing protective medical masks, marched from Montparnasse train station, chanting anti-Macron slogans.

A police source put the numbers at about 400.

Riot police briefly used teargas and about 2,000 security forces were deployed across the city to manage the crowd.

The protesters, named after the high-visibility jackets they wear, were holding a 70th consecutive Saturday of action. The movement emerged late in 2018, triggered by fuel tax rises, and swelled into a revolt against Macron's government.

While protests are now much smaller, anger at Macron's government remains and Saturday's demonstration served as a remainder to the president a day before local elections.

Today's vote is an important test for Macron, with opponents now particularly angered by his plans to reform the French pensions system. His party is not expected to do well.

"We had to come and mark the day to tell Macron that we're still here and that we won't accept his pension reform," said one pensioner.

Voters will begin choosing mayors for 35,000 town halls and almost half a million councillors today in elections overshadowed by the coronavirus outbreak, which is expected to hit turnout.



A couple wearing protective face masks and gloves sit on a bench, in Seville, Spain, yesterday

Spain plans partial lockdown from tomorrow to fight virus

REUTERS — MADRID

Spain plans to put its 47 million inhabitants under partial lockdown from tomorrow as part of a 15-day state of emergency plan to combat the coronavirus, a draft of an official decree showed.

The government will say all Spaniards must stay home except to buy food, go to the pharmacy, to the hospital, or to work or for other emergencies, the draft discussed yesterday by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and his ministers showed.

Restaurants, conference centres and all leisure and sports activities — including cinemas, theatres, swimming pools or football grounds - will be shut down.

A source with knowledge of the talks said the measures that are part of the lockdown.

All public transport would be curtailed, the draft showed, with airline, train, bus and boat operators told they need to cut their services by at least half and that any plane, train, bus or other means of transport can only be a third full.

The draft decree does not, however, foresee closing the country's borders.

Employers would have the obligation to let their workers work remotely and judicial proceedings will be suspended.

Spain's Interior Ministry would control all police forces, including local and regional ones, under the 15-day emergency.

The health and transport ministries would also have nationwide reach, taking over some local or regional powers, according to the draft, which Catalan and Basque leaders immediately criticised.

Spain is the second hardest-hit country in Europe after Italy, with 193 deaths and 6,250 cases so far, public broadcaster TVE said, well up from 120 deaths reported on Friday.

Former Nato chief Solana has coronavirus

AFP — MADRID

Former Nato secretary-general Javier Solana is being treated at a Madrid hospital for coronavirus, a source close to the Spanish politician said yesterday.

"He tested positive and is evolving favourably," the source said, confirming a report in conservative newspaper *ABC* which said he had been hospitalised for the disease in the Spanish capital on Wednesday.

In a tweet sent to a well wisher, the former Spanish foreign minister said he was "getting better".

Solana, 77, served as Nato secretary-general from 1995 to 1999, then as the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs from 1999 to 2009.

Putin signs Russia's constitutional reform law

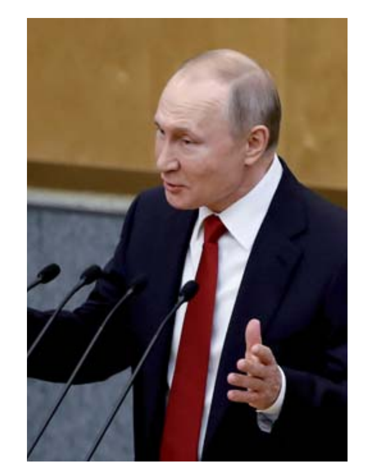
AFP — MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin **(pictured)** yesterday signed the package of constitutional reforms he had proposed, including a clause giving him an option to run for two more terms.

The Kremlin has published the 68-page law spelling out the constitutional reforms on the official website. Putin's signature triggers a special procedure for the package, which differs from the way laws usually go into effect.

The reforms will be sent to the Russian Constitutional Court which has a week to rule on whether to approve the law.

The reforms will be sent to the Russian Constitutional Court which has a week to rule on whether to approve the law, which would reset Putin's constitutional limit on terms in power.



The law will then be voted on by the Russian public.

The Kremlin has named April 22 as the day of the vote, and Russia's Senate Speaker Valentina Matvienko yesterday told journalists that the voting "must take place despite various worries about coronavirus."

Some speculated in recent weeks that the Kremlin will initiate voting over the Internet, which the opposition has slammed as a sure way to falsify the result.

Putin, 67, stunned the country on Tuesday when he backed a last-minute proposal to add a condition to the reform package for his possible return to the Kremlin after 2024, when he is constitutionally required to step down.

The measure, added on the day when the State Duma lower house was voting for the reforms, was swiftly passed and the bill subsequently sailed through the upper house and regional parliaments.

The Russian leader had proposed to change the constitution in January, but until this week denied that he is seeking to extend his rule. His spokesman said Putin changed his mind due to global instability.

The amendments also change the balance of power, increasing the role of the State Council advisory body, and giving both parliament and the president additional instruments of authority.

Dozens detained at Russian oppn protest

AFP — MOSCOW

Moscow police detained dozens of people at a protest against "political repressions" near the headquarters of the Russian security service, including a well-known human rights activist.

The protest demanding to free political prisoners was called by supporters of men convicted this year on terrorism charges, many of whom said in court they had been tortured by the FSB security service.

Mostly young protesters turned up to participate in picketing near the FSB building, with some unfurling signs calling the security service the "Federal Service of Lawlessness" while others shouted "Shame!"

The OVD Info website, which tracks detentions at political protests, listed 49 people as detained by police, adding that some were hurt in the altercations.

A correspondent at the scene saw about 30 detentions.

Some at the protest spoke out against the planned constitutional reforms currently in process of being adopted, which will give President Vladimir Putin a chance to run for two more terms.

"The authories are using targeted repressions in order to rule forever," said leftist politician Sergei Udaltsov.

"We are seeing an attempt to overthrow the constitutional regime, to reset the (presidential) term limits, solidarity is more important than ever," he said prior to getting arrested.

Putin yesterday signed the constitutional reform law, but it still needs to be backed by the constitutional court as well as a simple majority in a public vote announced for April 22.

Veteran human rights campaigner Lev Ponomaryov, who chairs the For Human Rights organisation, also was among those arrested in the sweep by national guard and police, which announced via loudspeaker the action is not authorised.

He was seen arguing with police that pickets don't require authorisation, before being led to a police bus.



Russian riot police officers detain a participant of an unsanctioned rally in front of the headquarters of the FSB security services, in central Moscow, yesterday.

OVD Info later said that Ponomaryov was beaten at the police station by masked officers, posting a photo of the 78-year-old campaigner sporting what looked like a bruise on his face.

A court in Penza region last month handed terms between six and 18 years to seven young men who were accused of creating a terrorist organisation called "Network" with the goal of overthrowing the government.

They all denied charges in court, and most said they had been tortured in custody with electrodes and beatings to extract confessions since their arrests in 2017 and 2018.

Two other defendants in the case are still on trial in St. Petersburg.

Top Swiss court quashes acquittals over 'IS' videos

AFP — GENEVA

Switzerland's highest court said that it had quashed the acquittal of two leading figures in a group who had been accused over two alleged IS (militants) propaganda videos.

The Supreme Court said in a statement that it had accepted the appeal of Switzerland's attorney-general, saying that the men's alleged behaviour had not been properly described in the indictment.

The case is therefore sent back to the federal criminal court "for a new decision", the statement said.

In 2018, the lower court had handed a 20-month suspended sentence to Naim Cherni, head of "cultural production" at the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland (ICC), for making IS propaganda videos in Syria.

The ICCS's head Nicolas Blancho and spokesman Qaasim Illi, who were accused of having approved the videos, were both acquitted.

In 2015, the group published on its YouTube channel a film that included an interview with the head of the Syrian branch of the IS terror group Al Qaeda.

A second film was screened that year in a hotel in the Swiss city of Winterthur, before being published on the YouTube channel.

Besides quashing the acquittal of Blancho and Illi, the Supreme Court also rejected an appeal by Naim Cherni against his conviction.

Jack Ma donates 2 million face masks for Europe

REUTERS — BRUSSELS

Chinese billionaire and Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma has pledged to donate two million protective masks for distribution across Europe, with a first consignment arrived in Belgium late on Friday.

A cargo plane loaded with 500,000 masks and other medical supplies such as test kits landed at Liege Airport. The consignment will be sent to Italy, a joint statement by the Alibaba and Jack Ma foundations, the Belgian region of Wallonia and Liege Airport said.

Further flights are due arrive in coming days to the airport, which is set to become Alibaba's main European hub for e-commerce shipments.

Ma has also said he will donate 500,000 coronavirus testing kits and one million masks to the US, while urging international cooperation to fight the health crisis.

Romanian MPs endorse Premier in vote of confidence

REUTERS — BUCHAREST

Romania's centrist Prime Minister Ludovic Orban won a parliamentary vote of confidence by a large margin as expected, yesterday, with all parties seeking to end a political stalemate and focus on reining in the spread of coronavirus.

President Klaus Iohannis asked the interim premier to form a government on Friday.

Cabinet ministers quarantined themselves for two weeks, after coming into contact with a coronavirus-infected lawmaker.

"It's been 286 votes for the government out of 309 cast ballots and 23 MPs voted against it," a senior ruling party deputy said.

Lawmakers toppled Orban's minority Liberal government at the beginning of February, but he has continued running the country on an interim basis with limited powers.

Since then, rival parties have been jockeying for position before municipal and parliament elections in June, respectively in November this year.

But the onset of the coronavirus, which has so far infected 102 people in the European Union member, meant Orban's nomination passed very easily through parliament - restoring full powers to his government to fight the outbreak.

"Our party has taken full responsibility at these difficult times, and now, with a full power government, I'm confident we will manage to rein in coronavirus more resolutely," Orban said in an online speech.

Yesterday, Romania heightened restrictions enforced so far, banning cultural, scientific, religious activities involving more than 50 people in a closed space from 100.

Colombian migration officers are seen wearing protective face masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as they stand at the Simon Bolivar International Bridge, in the border with Venezuela, in Cucuta, Colombia, yesterday.

Monarch butterflies drop 53% in wintering area: Mexico

AP — MEXICO CITY

The number of monarch butterflies that showed up at their winter resting grounds decreased about 53 percent this year, Mexican officials said.

Some activists called the decline "heartbreaking," but the Mexico head of the World Wildlife Fund said the reduction "is not alarming."

WWF Mexico director Jorge Rickards said the previous year's large numbers were "atypical" and the monarchs had returned to their average population levels of recent years.

The government commission for natural protected areas said the butterflies' population was "stable," even though they covered only 2.8 hectares this year. That was down from 6.05 hectares the previous year. Because the monarchs cluster so densely in pine and fir trees, it is easier to count them by area rather than by individuals.

"During the most recent wintering season the norm has been for the butterflies to cover an average of about three hectares," Rickards said.

"The last season, 2018-19, was very good, with 6.05 hectares of forest cover, but it was certainly atypical, thanks to the fact that the first generation of butterflies in the spring of 2018 encountered favourable weather conditions to reproduce," he said.

In contrast, butterflies in the spring of 2019 encountered colder weather in Texas than the previous year, and thus were less able to reproduce.

Millions of monarchs migrate from the United States and Canada each year to pine and fir forests west of Mexico's capital.

In contrast to Rickards' view, Tierra Curry, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, wrote that "scientists were expecting the count to be down slightly, but this level of decrease is heartbreaking."

Environmentalist and author Homero Aridjis said that "the decline of over 53 percent of populations in the butterfly reserve is worrisome, above all because of the effects of climate change on the migration route and on the wintering grounds in Mexico."

Aridjis said crime and deforestation in Mexico is also a cause for alarm. One butterfly activist and a part-time guide in the reserve were murdered earlier this year.

Last year's numbers were the biggest since the 2006-2007 season. Two years ago, the butterflies covered 2.48 hectares, similar to this year's numbers. The butterflies hit a low of just 0.67 hectares in 2013-2014.

Loss of habitat, especially the milkweed where the monarchs lay their eggs, pesticide and herbicide use, as well climate change, all pose threats to the species' migration.

Puerto Rico govt confirms first coronavirus cases

AP — SAN JUAN

Tests have confirmed three cases of the new coronavirus in Puerto Rico, the first for the US territory, Governor Wanda Vazquez said.

She also announced that the public school system would close for 14 days and that no cruise ships or the ferry from the Dominican Republic would be allowed to dock.

Vazquez said one of the cases involved a local man who had relatives who traveled off the island and the other two are tourists from northern Italy, which is at the center of a major outbreak of COVID-19 disease in that nation.

Even before the announcement, several events including concerts and a circus performance had been canceled on the island due to worries about the virus,.

COVID-19: LatAm announces partial lockdown

BLOOMBERG — CARACAS

Latin America is stepping up its response to the coronavirus pandemic, with governments across the region announcing a series of new measures.

Presidents in Venezuela, Colombia, Chile and Uruguay went on national television to report the partial closure of borders, quarantine measures, and the banning of large public events.

It was Venezuela, though, with its health care system in crisis after years of economic collapse, that announced the strictest measures. President Nicolas Maduro said all schools and universities would be closed and that workplaces would follow suit in the next few days. The country has already suspended many flights, while the opposition has canceled street protests.

Colombia's President Ivan Duque said yesterday that he was closing the nation's border with Venezuela. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans cross the border every day in search of food or medicines, or simply to flee the country.

While the number of coronavirus cases in Latin America remains relatively low, they're rising steadily. Brazil now has 98 confirmed cases, Chile has 43 cases, Peru 38, Argentina 34, and Mexico 23. Uruguay and Venezuela each have fewer than 10.

Chile's President Sebastian Pinera warned that an additional 2,000 people in the country are at imminent risk of infection. He pledged more funds for the health care system to buy equipment, while stepping back from the immediate closure of schools.

Uruguay's President Luis Lacalle Pou declared a health emergency, with the partial closure of the country's borders.

Trump takes coronavirus test as death toll in US rises to 51

AFP — WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump said yesterday he had taken a coronavirus test, after days of dismissing concerns at his recent exposure to a disease that has paralysed the globe and could affect millions of Americans.

Appearing at a White House news conference where he attempted again to provide guidance and assurance to a worried population, Trump said he had gone ahead with the test — which he had repeatedly claimed not to need.

"I also took the test last night," said Trump, who is not showing symptoms of the virus according to White House doctors, but has rubbed shoulders with several people who since tested positive.

The 73-year-old President said results were expected in a day or two.

Addressing the same briefing, Vice-President Mike Pence announced a further restriction on travel to the United States, saying a travel ban imposed on European nations over the pandemic would be extended to the United Kingdom and Ireland Tuesday.

The twin developments reflected a growing sense of urgency in Washington as the spreading virus has dramatically affected life across the United States, leading to countless closures and cancellations with millions working from home for fear of infection, and school districts closing one after the other.

Trump declared a national emergency on Friday in what critics say was a long-delayed admission of the gravity of the crisis, freeing up some $40bn in disaster relief funds for local authorities.

Late on Friday night, the US House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to pass a bill — crafted by Democrats in consultation with the Trump administration — to provide billions of dollars for free virus testing, emergency paid sick leave and family leave related to the epidemic.

Supported by Trump, it is expected to easily pass the Republican-controlled Senate next week.

News of Trump's test marked a further turning point, after days of resistance to the suggestion.

Prior to the briefing, the White House also announced it had begun protectively checking the temperature of anyone coming into close contact with Vice-President Mike Pence or Trump — who said his own temperature was checked before entering too.

Before yesterday's briefing, a member of the White House medical team took the temperature of all journalists wishing to attend. One of them was excluded after a high reading.

Fifty-one Americans have died from the novel coronavirus, according to a tally by John Hopkins University, as the pandemic has claimed more than 5,700 lives in some 137 countries.

Repeatedly attacked for sending out mixed signals on the health crisis, the President raised eyebrows on Friday when, contrary to medical advice, he was seen shaking hands all round as he gathered his large coronavirus response team at the White House.

At the briefing yesterday, he attributed that practice to long-time habit as a politician — "people put their hand out... you don't think about it" — but said it would have to change.

"Maybe people shouldn't be shaking hands for the long term," said Trump, a self-declared germophobe, "because it does transmit flu and other things." Trump had told reporters a day earlier he would "most likely" get tested as he was grilled on his contacts with several members of a Brazilian presidential delegation visiting his Florida resort, who have since tested positive for the virus.

A White House doctor later walked that back, saying the President had no symptoms and did not need to be tested.

But yesterday Trump settled the matter, saying said he did indeed take the test late Friday.

The announcement came the same day a 30-day US ban took effect on all travel from the EU's Schengen border-free zone, part of a global clamping down on travel in an effort to curtail the virus's spread.

Pence said the ban — which notably excluded Britain and Ireland — would include both countries as of midnight EST on Monday (0400 GMT on Tuesday).

"Americans in the UK or Ireland can come home. Legal residents can come home," Pence said. Pelosi said she was "proud" to have reached an agreement on the relief package after days of tense talks with the White House.



US President Donald Trump speaks during a press briefing about COVID-19 alongside US Vice-President Mike Pence (left) at the White House in Washington, DC, yesterday.

Guatemala bans arrivals from US, Canada to fight epidemic

REUTERS — GUATEMALA CITY

Guatemala will from tomorrow widen travel restrictions to fight the spread of coronavirus, banning arrivals from the United States and Canada, President Alejandro Giammattei said.

"We are therefore announcing that everyone who arrives from Canada and the United States between now and midnight on Monday will be subject to quarantining," Giammattei said in a televised address.

The President said he had also asked the Mexican government to halt deportations of migrants by land to Guatemala. No cruise ships will be allowed to dock, but public events and school classes would go ahead for the time being, he added.

Guatemala has already banned arrivals from European countries, China, Iran, South Korea and North Korea.

Google 'helping to develop' self-check website

AGENCIES — SAN FRANCISCO

US President Donald Trump announced on Friday that Internet giant Alphabet is creating a website where people will be able to check whether they have symptoms of the novel coronavirus.

Verily Life Sciences, once a project in a Google X lab devoted to "moonshot" projects and now its own health business unit, is testing a "tool to help triage individuals for COVID-19 testing," Google confirmed on Twitter.

"Verily is in the early stages of development, and planning to roll testing out in the Bay Area, with the hope of expanding more broadly over time," the tweet said, referring to San Francisco and surrounding communities.

Trump thanked Google while declaring a state of national emergency due to the deadly coronavirus pandemic.

Google is helping to develop a website "to determine whether a test is warranted and to facilitate testing at a nearby convenient location," Trump said.

Google has a large team of engineers devoted to the project, and has made significant progress, according to Trump.

"Our overriding goal is to stop the spread of the virus and help all Americans impacted by this," Trump said.

"Again, we don't want everybody taking this test. It is totally unnecessary. And this will pass."

A launch date for the website should be known by late Sunday, according to Vice-President Mike Pence. "You can go to the website, type in your symptoms and be given direction whether or not a test is indicated," Pence said.

The website will then direct users to locations where they can obtain drive-through testing, he said.

San Francisco has begun setting up temporary, drive-through coronavirus testing locations.

About 1,700 Google workers have volunteered to help with coronavirus-related efforts, according to a person familiar with the matter, but it is unclear whether all of them are involved with developing the new website. Carolyn Wang, another Verily spokeswoman, said it initially aimed to assess testing needs for people more prone to catching the virus, such as healthcare workers. But she said Verily now plans to trial the system more broadly at several sites around the San Francisco region.

Wang added that Verily was "collaborating closely with organizations like Quest Diagnostics and LabCorp who are also working on additional approaches to making testing more accessible and expedient in other areas."



A line of shoppers snakes around a store in Novato, California, yesterday. Hoards of shoppers rushed to stock up on toilet paper, paper towels and cleaning supplies as communities begin hunkering down as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Trump says Fed not 'aggressive' enough to counter slump

AFP — WASHINGTON

US President Donald Trump accused the Federal Reserve yesterday of not being "aggressive" enough to counteract the coronavirus-linked economic slump, while insisting he had no plans to replace the bank's president, frequently a target of his criticism.

"Other boards and other countries and people representing those countries are taking a much more aggressive action than our Fed," Trump said during a White House press conference.

"And their equivalent of the Fed rate is lower, in some cases by two points. That's a lot," the president said.

"We have the currency, the power... We shouldn't have a Fed rate that's higher than our competitor nations."

Trump added that Fed president Jerome Powell had "made a lot of bad decisions, in my opinion." Powell was nominated by Trump.

Russian jets intercepted near Alaska

AFP — WASHINGTON

Two pairs of Russian military reconnaissance aircraft have been intercepted near Alaska, the North American Aerospace Defense Command said yesterday.

The Russian aircraft entered and remained in the air defense identification zone, a security perimeter in international airspace, for about four hours, the joint US-Canadian command said.

NORAD's "F-22s, supported by KC-135 Stratotankers and E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft, intercepted two pairs of Russian Tu-142s entering the Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone on Saturday, March 14th," the command reported.

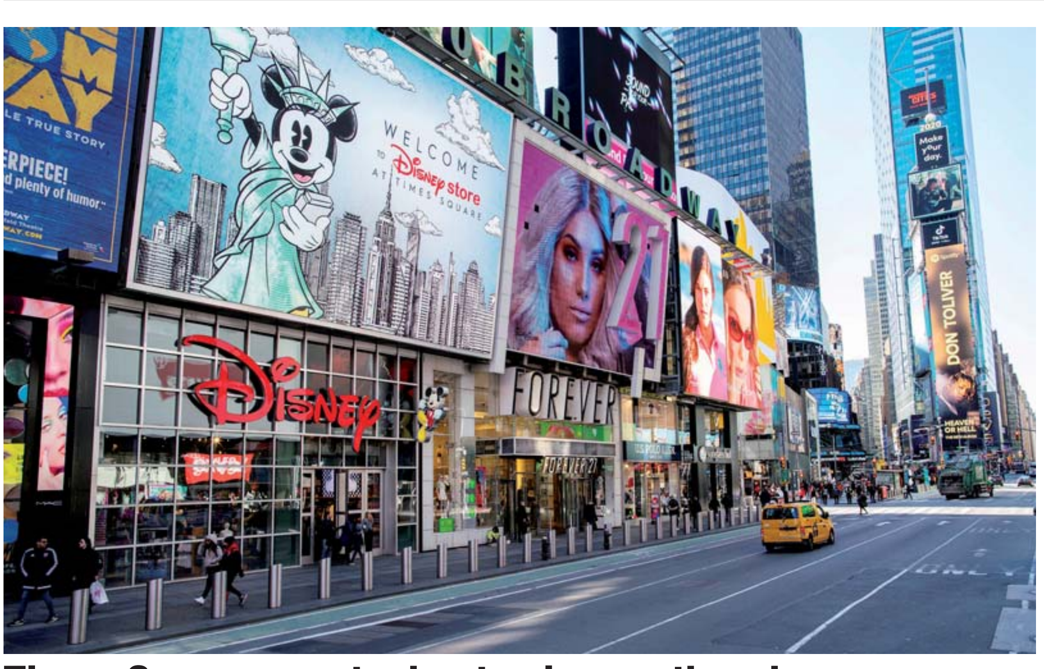
The Russian aircraft never entered sovereign US or Canadian airspace, the command said.

But they "loitered in the vicinity of the US Navy's ICEX where they are conducting submarine exercises," NORAD said.

ICEX is a naval exercise in the Arctic Ocean.

It was the second time in as many weeks that Russian jets acted similarly.

NORAD is a joint US-Canadian command focused on the defense of the North American airspace.



Times Square empty due to virus outbreak

A cab drives down at 7th Avenue in Times Square while it is seen nearly empty during a regular day due to COVID-19 outbreak in New York City, yesterday.

Argentina, Ecuador deaths take Latin America's virus toll to five

AFP — MONTEVIDEO

Argentina announced its second coronavirus-related death on Friday as Ecuador reported its first, taking the total death toll in Latin America to five as the virus shows signs of spreading rapidly.

Venezuela, Uruguay, Guatemala and Suriname reported their first cases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall cases in the region have more than doubled in the last two days to over 340 as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) warned governments on Thursday to prepare their health services to cope.

Several Latin American countries have tightened restrictions on travel links with Europe, from where many people in the region are descended and still have family.

A 61-year-old Argentine man who returned from Italy on February 24 and had previously suffered from pneumonia died of "respiratory failure," the Chaco provincial health ministry said in a statement.

Argentina reported the first Latin American coronavirus death on March 7. In Ecuador, a 71-year-old woman who had traveled to Spain died of "severe respiratory failure," Health Minister Catalina Andramuno said.

The woman was also the first person in Ecuador to have been diagnosed with the virus.

Guyana's governing group is declared winner in disputed vote

AP — GEORGETOWN, GUYANA

The election commission in oil-rich Guyana has declared that the governing coalition won the country's disputed vote, despite international concerns about the credibility of the process.

The commission said late Friday that it will move this weekend to verify vote totals in the March 2 general election as international observer groups said the tallying was flawed and not transparent.

Barring any successful court challenges, the governing coalition led by retired army Gen. David Granger, 74, would begin a second five-year term in office. Coalition officials said they plan to swear in Granger on Monday.

Joseph Harmon, a campaign manager of the governing coalition, appealed for calm and said the government hopes that the "country can return to normal."

"Not a single finger has been lifted against the President and the coalition regarding fraud," Harmon said. "The people of Guyana came out based on the message from our campaign." However, the main opposition People's Progressive Party, or PPP, led by former housing minister Irfaan Ali, along with some observer groups have complained about their inability to verify numbers provided by election officials.

An observer team from the Washington-based Organization of American States, headed by former Jamaican prime minister Bruce Golding, withdrew from the monitoring process on Friday and said its final report in the coming weeks will reflect dissatisfaction with the system. It earlier called for an abandonment of the manual, vote-tallying system because of its vulnerabilities to fraud.

The US and several other Western ambassadors who were monitoring the counting as accredited observers also walked out of the counting late Friday, saying they were unhappy with the lack of a verification system.

In a statement, the ambassadors warned that a president sworn in under a process deemed to be flawed could not be considered legitimate. "The betterment of Guyana and its people has always been our interest. In that spirit we urge all parties to not do anything which could lead to Guyana's isolation," the ambassadors said.